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March 9, 1892.

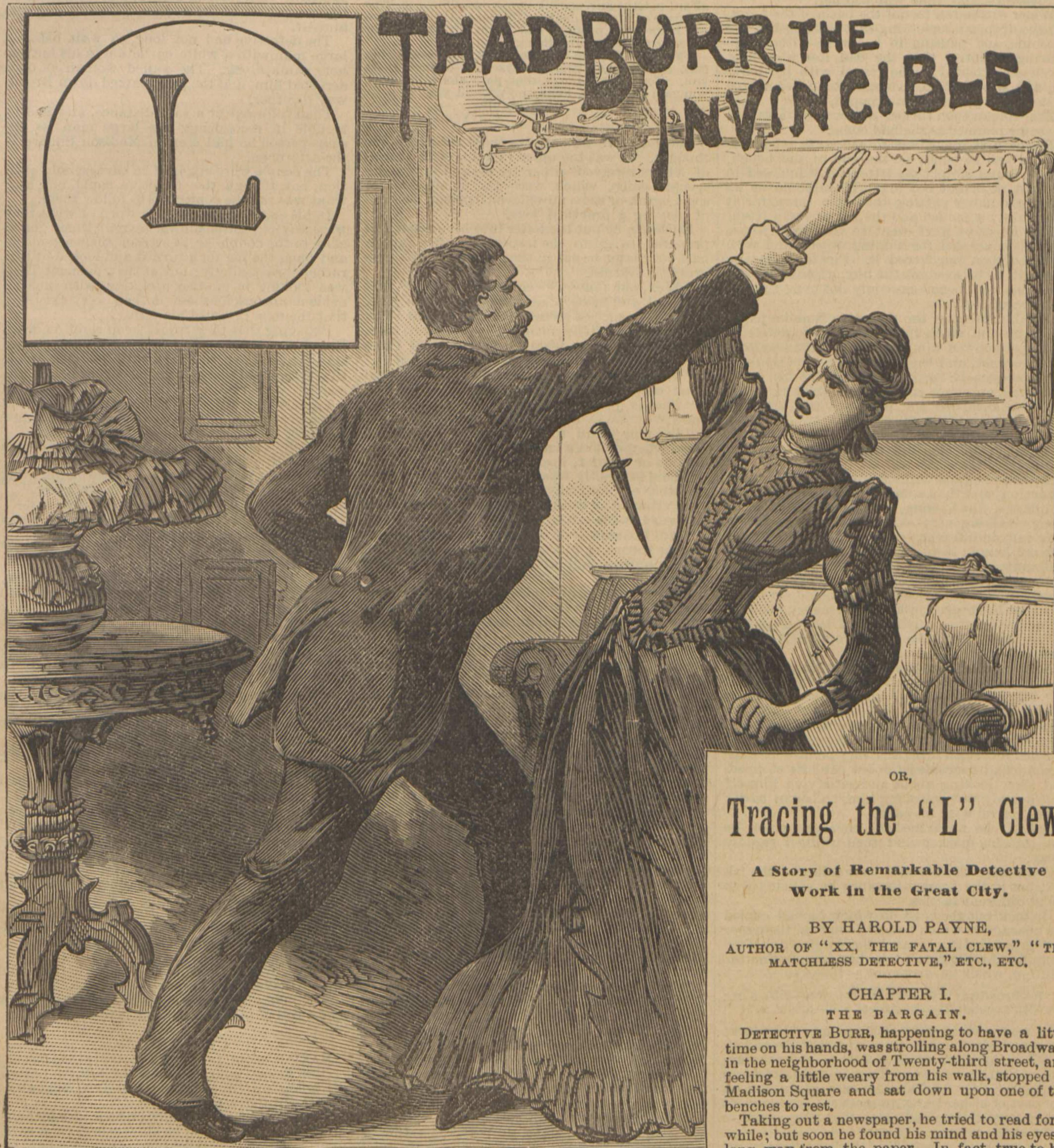
No. 698.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LIV.



THE WARY DETECTIVE GRASPED HER UPLIFTED WRIST IN HIS STEEL-LIKE CLASP AND
THE WEAPON DROPPED HARMLESSLY TO THE FLOOR.

OR, Tracing the "L" Clew.

A Story of Remarkable Detective
Work in the Great City.

BY HAROLD PAYNE,
AUTHOR OF "XX, THE FATAL CLEW," "THE
MATCHLESS DETECTIVE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I. THE BARGAIN.

DETECTIVE BURR, happening to have a little time on his hands, was strolling along Broadway, in the neighborhood of Twenty-third street, and feeling a little weary from his walk, stopped in Madison Square and sat down upon one of the benches to rest.

Taking out a newspaper, he tried to read for a while; but soon he found his mind and his eyes a long way from the paper. In fact, true to his detective instinct, he was unconsciously reading faces.

Thad Burr, the Invincible.

As he watched the panorama of passing people, a lady stepped out of the procession and sat down upon the same seat with him.

He glanced carelessly toward her and caught the merest glimpse of her face, and that was all, for the next instant she drew a thick veil down over her features.

That slight glimpse, however, enabled the detective to make a mental note of the fact that she was rather pretty and to record her appearance in his memory. Further than this he thought very little about the matter, attributing her action to modesty, and he probably would have left his seat a moment later without giving her another thought, had it not been for a peculiar movement on her part.

She first took a small stencil-plate from her pocketbook and then a small brush, and wetting the latter in her mouth, placed the stencil-plate on one of the slats of the seat and drew the brush over it.

This part of the performance the detective could only guess at, as the stenciling was done on the end of the bench out of his sight. It was not until a moment later that he knew positively what she had done.

Her action was deliberate. She did not attempt to conceal anything, and as soon as she had finished the job she returned the stencil to her pocketbook as coolly as if it had been a bill or a coin.

She then arose and sauntered carelessly toward the large fountain, which was but a dozen yards away, and Thad watched her.

When within ten feet of the basin of the fountain she dropped something that glistened in the sunshine, and pausing in her walk without appearing to notice that she had lost anything, carelessly prodded in the gravel with her parasol, and in doing so, managed to cover up the glistening object she had dropped.

The woman then turned and walked away in the same manner as she had come.

Thad's first move was to ascertain what the woman had stenciled on the end of the bench, and he found simply the letter "L" inclosed in a circle, in bright red ink. There could be no doubt about her putting the letter there, for it was plainly stenciled and the ink was still fresh.

The detective next went to the place where she had concealed the shining object, and with his cane soon uncovered it. Picking it up he found it to be a small tin box, similar in size and shape to a pencil-case only not more than an inch long.

Opening the box the detective found a paper rolled up and stuck inside. A hasty glance at the paper showed him nothing but the scarlet L in one corner, and these characters lower down on the sheet:—B: 23; 7: 30—6: A: 23; 8: 30.

Making an exact copy of this on a card, the detective returned the paper to the box and again concealed it in the gravel.

He then resumed his seat and, apparently, his newspaper; but he did not read—he merely watched.

An hour elapsed without anything of interest occurring, and then something did occur.

A large, fine-looking, well-dressed man came along, walking very slowly, and trying to appear very indifferent, but Thad Burr's quick eye was not long in seeing that the man was nervous and anxious about something.

As he walked along he scanned every bench closely, and when he came to the one upon which Thad sat he stopped, glanced nervously about to ascertain whether anybody was looking at him or not, and then walked, with apparent unconcern, toward the fountain.

Although the man walked with no particular aim or destination in view, the detective noticed one thing which possibly not one in a thousand would have observed, and that was that the man's steps were deliberate, measured and evidently he was counting them, for when he had reached a certain point (the very point where the woman had concealed the tin case) he stopped, and after looking about and satisfying himself that nobody was watching him, he began to dig in the gravel with his cane.

Quickly he unearthed the tin case, which he put into his pocket and then walked rapidly away.

Ordinarily Thad would have followed the fellow, but in the present instance he concluded to adopt different tactics.

He took out the card on which he had copied the characters which he had found on the paper and proceeded to unravel the enigma involved therein. And it didn't take him long to find the solution, which he wrote out as follows:

"B—Broadway; 23—23d street; 7:30—7:30 P. M.; 6 A—6th avenue; 23—23d street; 8:30—8:30 P. M."

It was evident that this was an engagement for somebody to meet on the corner of Broadway and Twenty-third street at 7:30 in the evening, and at Sixth avenue and Twenty-third street an hour later. Or, perhaps, in case of failure on the part of either party to meet the engagement at the former time and place that they were to meet at the latter.

"It is clear," mused Thad, "that this is no ordinary tryst. This mysterious sign and this cabalistic paper betoken that there is something uncommon, perhaps criminal, behind it all.

Therefore, I shall be on hand at this meeting, at all events."

With that, Thad Burr put the card into his pocket and left the Park.

Going down Fifth avenue at a rapid walk, he soon reached Thirteenth street. Then, turning toward Sixth avenue and crossing that thoroughfare, he very quickly arrived at his apartments, or "studio," as he called it.

As he entered the hall, he found two letters in the box for him. One was directed in a strange hand, but the other was in the familiar chirography of Chief Inspector Byrnes.

As soon as Detective Burr got inside his room, he tore open this letter and read it. It ran as follows:

"DEAR THAD:—

"Come to the office at your earliest convenience. Something important. One of those mysterious cases which you, and you alone, can work out.

"Yours truly,

"THOMAS BYRNES,
Inspector."

The other letter was as follows:

"MR. THADDEUS BURR, Detective:—

"DEAR SIR:—You will be surprised at the receipt of this, no doubt, as you never heard of me before. I know you, however, know your peculiar talent and tact in working out a mystery, and that is why I write to you.

"There is a peculiar case at No. — Fifth avenue, near Sixty-third street. My position is such that I dare say no more, and for Heaven's sake destroy this note as soon as you have read it, as I cannot afford to have any mortal save yourself see it. This is a case of life and death with me, and I trust you will respect my position and grant my request, for the sake of the information given.

"You will find the house difficult of access, and in this, although an inmate myself, I cannot assist you. You must manage that part alone, but once you gain admission, I can and will aid you.

"Respectfully,

"A YOUNG GIRL"

The detective did not give the latter note much thought. It was too much in a line with dozens of letters received either by himself or the inspector daily, which were the emanations of some crank or some mischievous person desirous of playing a practical joke.

However, he put the letter into his pocket and prepared to go to the inspector's office, and a half-hour later he sat in the presence of the irrepressible Byrnes.

"Well, old fellow," were the inspector's first words, "you have been successful in the past, even where success seemed impossible; but I can give you very little encouragement in this case. So far as I can see it's a coker, and all I can say to you, is to go in and make the most of it."

"What is the case, inspector, anyway?" asked Thad with a puzzled expression.

"That is just what I am telling you—I don't know."

"Do you mean to tell me that you do not know whether it is a case of burglary, arson, abduction or murder, inspector?"

"That is exactly what I mean to say," replied the other emphatically. "I don't know."

"Perhaps you can tell me where the accident happened or the crime then."

"No, I cannot even do that," returned the inspector throwing himself back in his chair and taking a long pull at his cigar. "I wish I could."

"That is strange," observed the detective, half musingly. "How do you know then that any crime has been committed or anything has gone wrong?"

"I do not know for certain. Here is all I know about it: Yesterday morning's mail brought a letter written in a girlish hand and signed, 'A Young Girl,' which stated that there was eminent need of my services at No. — Fifth avenue. At first I thought it was another one of those fake letters, but as I was driving up the avenue in my buggy in the afternoon it occurred to me to look for the number, which would be in the neighborhood of Sixty-third street, and I found that the number given was a vacant lot."

"I was positive then that the matter was a joke, and thought no more about it; but when I got back to the office I found another letter from a different person saying that my services were needed, and so on, and inclosing a small card with a letter L inside of a circle, stenciled in red ink. Under the name was written, 'Two months, at most. Price, \$10,000. No risk to you.'"

"Was there any address on the last letter or the card?" inquired Thad.

"No. You think it a fake, don't you?"

"I do not."

"No? Well, that's a beginning."

"I believe there is a good deal in it, and I will find it out in a few days."

"I wish you success, my boy," exclaimed the inspector, laughing; "but if you do find anything in it, you will strike a more difficult job than you imagine. But my opinion is you will find the whole matter a sell, and I wouldn't have you waste the time looking it up if it were not that things are very dull just now."

"You may be right, inspector," returned Thad, rising to go; "you generally are; but I am inclined to think you are mistaken this time."

"What?" exclaimed the inspector, taking the

hint, "you don't mean to tell me that you already know something about this affair?"

"Not very much," assured Thad, smiling. "A little, though."

"Well, I'll be hanged!" ejaculated Byrnes, blowing out a long whiff of smoke. "There is no getting the start of you, Thad. Here I've been giving you the meager details of an affair that you are probably already half-posted on. I give it up. I've changed my mind, Thad; you will make something out of it; I'm satisfied on that point."

"I will, if there is anything in it, inspector. Good-by, sir."

"Good-bye, my boy! Success to you!"

After leaving the inspector Thad just had time to snatch a bite of supper, get to his room and make himself up as a well-to-do man about town, before it was time to be at the meeting-place of his parties, and he hurried away to the corner of Twenty-third street.

Sauntering along carelessly, but keeping his eyes alert, he was not long in catching a glimpse of a closely-veiled woman walking backward and forward, evidently looking for some one.

The detective was unable to make out whether it was the same woman he had seen in Madison Square or not, owing to the thickness of her veil, but from similarity of size and walk, he judged that it was the same.

He walked a little way along Twenty-third street toward the west, and finally concealed himself in a dark doorway where he had an excellent view of the corner, and could watch the movements of the woman, without being seen himself.

The detective had not long to wait before a large man with a white carnation in his button-hole, came along. The veiled woman at once accosted him, and the pair walked down Broadway together.

Thad followed at a safe distance, and had no trouble in recognizing the large man as the same person he had seen in Madison Square in the afternoon.

The couple were engaged in earnest conversation, but, though the detective could not hear what was said he continued to follow them.

In his eagerness to catch a word of what they were saying, the shadower several times got so close to the couple as to attract their attention, and once the big man turned and looked at him rather threateningly; but at that moment Thad was looking in another direction, with such an evident unconsciousness of their very existence that the man resumed his walk.

Believing that they would keep right on down Broadway, the detective took a car at Sixteenth street, rode down to Fourteenth, and had ample time to conceal himself on the corner before the couple reached it.

Luckily they stopped on the same corner, and being very near, he was enabled to catch a few words of their conversation.

"Well, when can you come?" were the words the detective heard spoken by the man.

"In about a week," replied the woman. "It will take about that long to finish the other."

"And how long will it take to do my—my—"

"Job," added the woman. "About six weeks to two months; not longer than two months."

"Can't it be done in less than six weeks?" asked the man, anxiously.

"Not with safety. It could be done, of course, in a day; but in that case you would have to bear the risk. We take no chances on anything of that kind. You will find it will be better in the end to not be in a hurry."

"Very well," was answered, after a pause. "I presume you are right. And your price is—"

"Five thousand dollars," promptly replied the woman.

"That covers everything, does it? Salaries for the three of you, and the doctor—"

"The doctor's fee is extra," interrupted the woman. "He makes his own charges."

"How much is he likely to charge?" inquired the man, anxiously.

"I do not know; but I'll tell you now, if you go into this thing you must expect to spend money from the start, and lots of it. If you are at all afraid of spending money, you had better abandon the idea at once."

"Oh, well," grumbled the other, "you won't find me stingy."

"It will be the better for you if we do not," declared the woman, curtly. "I want a thousand dollars now, before we go any further."

"To-night?"

"Yes, now. You had timely notice, and should have come prepared."

The man hesitated a moment, and finally took out a roll of bills and handed it to the woman.

CHAPTER II.

MAKING SOME IMPORTANT ACQUAINTANCES.

THE money paid, the man and woman parted, he going up Broadway and she walking along Fourteenth street, west.

For a moment Thad was undecided which one to follow. He desired to know where each went, but a moment's reflection decided that the woman was the one to follow. Several things conduced to bring about this decision. In the first place he had seen the man in daylight and

would know him anywhere; whereas, he wasn't certain that this was the same woman he had seen in the Park.

That there was some crime behind all this the detective did not doubt, and therefore he shadowed the woman.

She kept on Fourteenth till she reached Eighth avenue, turned down that street and kept on until she reached Eighth street, and, turning west for a couple of blocks entered a house.

After a little reflection the detective decided to call at the house for some ostensible purpose, but had scarcely started to ascend the stoop when the door opened and the same woman (at least Thad supposed it was the same, although she still had her face veiled) came out, accompanied by two women, also heavily veiled.

The detective stepped quickly to one side of the stoop and managed to avert his face so that they could not see it, even if it had been less dark there, and allowed the three women to pass down the steps.

As he looked after them he could see, by comparison with the other two, that the woman whom he had thus far shadowed, was small of figure and girlish in her movements. One of the other two was unusually tall for a woman, very slender, and moved like a person advanced in years; while the other was somewhat stout, and although taller than the little one, was nevertheless shorter than the tall one.

The three only walked a little ways, when they took an Eighth avenue car for up-town.

Thad took the same car, but remained on the platform lest the little woman might recognize him and so become suspicious.

At Fifty-ninth street the three got out and took a cross-town car going east. Thad took the same car, and again remained on the platform. The women got out at Fifth avenue, and turning up that street, went nearly as far as Sixty-third street, where they went into a house, one of the finest mansions on the avenue, and when Thad looked at the number he found it to be identical with that sent to him in the anonymous letter!

Here was an astonisher!

What did it all mean?

The letter signed by the young girl was evidently no humbug, after all, and the job which would take a week longer to complete, and which must be finished before the five thousand dollar job could be undertaken, was undoubtedly the crime referred to in the letter.

Was here a clew?

But, as the writer of the anonymous letter stated, the trouble was, to get into the house, without being suspected.

At that moment he thought of the second engagement at Sixth avenue and Twenty-third street at 8:30; but on referring to his watch he knew that it was of no use to go there now. And as he could not get into the house that night and having nothing else in particular to do, he concluded to keep an eye upon the house for a while.

Strolling leisurely back and forth past the residence, his thoughts busy with the subject in hand, the time went by rapidly, and before he realized the fact it had approached midnight.

Finding it so late the shadower was on the point of quitting his post, when a carriage drove up to the door of the mansion and two ladies and a gentleman alighted. The ladies entered the house, but the gentleman only went as far as the door, conversed a moment with the ladies and then returned to the carriage and drove away.

Thad caught enough of the conversation to know that the ladies were young and belonged in the house, and that the gentleman was also young and was the escort of the young ladies on numerous occasions. At present they had just returned from the theater.

As the carriage rolled away, Thad cursed his luck that he had no conveyance by which he could follow rapidly enough to keep it in sight; but, fortunately, just at that moment an empty cab came down the avenue.

It did not take the detective a second to hail, and mount the cab and give instructions to the driver to keep the carriage in sight.

It had got considerably the start, but the cab-driver whipped up and was soon close behind it, where it kept until the carriage, or its occupant rather, reached his destination, which was the Hoffman House.

The young man, upon alighting, took the elevator and went up-stairs, presumably to his room; but, inspired by the hope that he might come down again, Thad went into the famous bar of that hostelry, and loitered about the place, looking at the pictures, statues, etc.

He was not disappointed, for, within twenty minutes the young man came down-stairs again and entered the bar-room.

He appeared to be the average society young man—vain, shallow, and well-dressed.

Thad was just thinking of some pretext upon which he could approach and speak to him, when, fortunately, an intimate of the detective, named Nevin, met the young man, shook hands with him and the two took a drink together.

Of course, Thad's friend did not recognize him in his disguise, but when he and the young man had chatted for some time, and finally

separated, the young man going up-stairs, Thad approached his friend, and making himself known, asked:

"Horace, who is that fellow?"

"That is young Armstrong, Fred Armstrong, the millionaire's son," replied Nevin.

"Are you on pretty intimate terms with him?"

"Well, yes," answered Nevin laughing. "I'll give you some idea how intimate we are. He is engaged to be married to a young lady who belongs to one of the best families in the city, and he wants to take me up to-morrow evening and introduce me to her sister."

"You don't say!" exclaimed Thad. "Where do these folks live?"

"Fifth avenue, near Sixty-third street."

Thad could hardly restrain his emotion, but he did, and after a moment's silence and reflection, remarked:

"I say, old fellow, are you very particular about going to call upon these folks?"

Nevin looked at him in some surprise.

"What are you up to, anyway, old man?" he demanded, laughing.

"Nothing."

"I know better. There is some game on, or you wouldn't be so anxious to know all these things."

"All right, then," confessed Thad; "there is something in the wind; but, you will excuse me for not telling you what it is, at present. Answer my question, won't you?"

"I oughtn't to," laughed Nevin, "and wouldn't if you were not the old friend that you are. Well, as to my being particular about going up, you ought to know me well enough by this time to understand that I would rather go to jail any time than go among young ladies."

"Have you promised to go?"

"Not positively; but Armstrong expects it and I will have to go, no doubt. He will never let up on me until I go."

"Very good. Now, I want you to do me a favor, and yourself one at the same time."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me go in your place."

Nevin laughed, immoderately.

"That would never do, old fellow," he averred.

"Why not?"

"The young chap is very particular whom he introduces to the young ladies, and would very likely object to taking a stranger."

"But, I sha'n't go as a stranger."

"I know, I could introduce you, but—"

"You needn't do even that."

"What do you mean?"

"I will go as yourself."

"Nonsense!"

"I mean what I say."

"What? disguise yourself to look like me?"

"That's it, precisely!"

"You couldn't fool that fellow, Thad. He has known me too long."

"I'll tell you what I'll do, old man," proposed Thad. "I'll go you a box of cigars that I can disguise so as to deceive your own brother."

"It's a go!" assented Nevin. "If you can do that I will willingly pay the bet. When shall it be, to-night?"

"No; it's too late now. In the morning."

"Will you risk it in daylight?"

"Certainly! You come to my rooms at ten in the morning, and I'll show you something that will astonish you. But, you haven't told me whether I might go in your place to call upon the young ladies or not."

"Certainly. If you can disguise yourself well enough to deceive Fred Armstrong, much less my own brother, you are welcome to go as myself."

"Good! Don't forget to-morrow."

"Not for a hundred dollars. I am too anxious to see the fun."

"All right. Good-night, old fellow."

"Good-night."

The next morning at ten sharp, Nevin was on hand at Thad's studio, anxious and enthusiastic to see the detective make up to look like himself.

Horace Nevin was a young man of twenty-five, a light blonde, and rather good-looking. There was scarcely a point of resemblance between him and the detective; a casual observer would have said, no point of resemblance. They were something near the same build, and there was not much difference in the color of their eyes, two very important features.

"Well, get to work," commanded Nevin, enthusiastically. "I want to see how I look."

"All right, my boy, you shall soon see," rejoined the detective.

He led the way into the dressing-room, and began the operation of making up.

The work was somewhat simplified by the fact of Thad's having laid out wig, beard and most of the articles needed, the night before; so that less than half an hour had elapsed before the work was completed.

Nevin was astonished.

When they stood side by side in the mirror he could not have told which was himself, if he had not alr ady known.

"Well, this beats the Dutch!" he exclaimed.

"I may as well buy the cigars at once, for my brother will never suspect it isn't I, unless it is in the voice."

Thad said something in which he imitated the young man's voice.

"That settles it," admitted Nevin. "I'll have to put a tag on myself or we will be getting mixed up."

They then left the detective's apartments and, a little while later, were on Broadway near the store of Nevin's brother.

"Now, I'll tell you what you want to do," said Nevin. "I am in the habit of borrowing money of my brother, and I'd like to have a fifty, this time, but haven't cheek enough to ask him. So that will be a good excuse for going in to see him. Just hit him for fifty. If you get it the cigars are yours."

"Nevin's brother kept a large jewelry store and was very well off, while Nevin himself had no particular business, and, although he had an independent income, was generally short of money.

Therefore when Thad walked into the place, the brother did not greet him very cordially but, instead, gave him a look which indicated plainly that he knew what the younger "brother" wanted, in advance.

"Well?" was his greeting, before Thad had had time to speak.

"Only fifty this time," answered Thad.

"Hub! you're modest," growled the brother. "There is one thing I am glad to see, though; you came to the point at once, instead of taking up my time with long stories about your bad luck and all that sort of thing."

"Oh, I've got bravely over that," declared Thad.

"I'm glad of it," said the brother, handing him the money.

When Thad returned to the sidewalk where he had left Nevin, and handed him the money, that young man was, if possible, more astonished than ever.

"This is the most remarkable thing I ever saw," asseverated Nevin. "But, see those fellows watching us. They evidently think we are twins."

When Thad looked he saw that two men were watching them, and, to his surprise, one of them was the big man whom he had seen in Madison Square, the day previous, and again on Broadway and Twenty-third street!

A thousand thoughts and suspicions rushed into the detective's mind, in an instant. Was it possible that the big man recognized him in his present disguise?

This seemed improbable; and yet, if it was not so, why had he been scrutinizing the detective so closely? Surely, not merely out of curiosity. Suddenly it occurred to Thad that possibly Nevin knew the large man, which might account for his curiosity.

"Do you know either of those men, Nevin?" asked Thad.

"Yes, I know them," replied Nevin; "and yet I am not acquainted with them. The large man is Colonel Marvin Manton and the other is Mr. Robert Langly. By the way, Langly is a brother of the two young ladies you are to call upon."

"You don't tell me!" exclaimed Thad. And then fearing that his astonishment had almost been the means of betraying his secret, he changed his manner, and said simply: "In that case I may possibly meet the gentleman."

"You may indeed, for he lives in the same house with them," informed Nevin, as they walked away.

"And yet it is not necessary that I should meet him, in calling upon his sisters. Indeed, the chances are that I will not."

"Oh, well, as to that, if you are anxious to meet him, it will be an easy matter when you once know his sisters."

"I presume. By the way, Nevin, what does this Manton do? What is his business, and his standing?"

"He is in some way connected with the insurance companies. He used to be president of one of the big concerns, down town, and very wealthy, but failed in business. Since then he has been connected with the business in various capacities. He has been charged with crooked dealing, but they were never able to prove anything. Langly has been his partner in some of his deals, but he has never been charged with dishonesty that I know of."

"Well, I think I shall call upon Armstrong," decided Thad. "I presume he will be at home at this time of day."

"Yes, this is the best time to catch him," said Nevin.

CHAPTER III.

CHALKY NIG.

ALTHOUGH it was nearly noon when Thad and his young friend reached the Hoffman House, young Armstrong was just taking his breakfast in his room, clad in his dressing-gown.

Nevin was a little apprehensive about the detective's success, notwithstanding the ease with which he had deceived his own brother, and he was for going up in advance, making the arrangements for the evening and then allowing the detective to go in afterward under the pretense that he (Nevin) had forgotten something.

But Thad persuaded him out of that notion, and after going over together a good many matters of mutual interest between Nevin and Armstrong, as being the subjects most likely to be touched upon, Thad left his young friend in the bar-room while he went up to Armstrong's room.

The young man drawled out a lazy "come in" in response to Thad's knock, and when the caller entered the room, the young man merely raised his eyes, languidly, enough to recognize the visitor.

"Well, Nev, old man," he drawled, "what brings you out so early?"

"Oh, I'm an early riser, you know," returned Thad, in Nevin's voice. "I was passing the hotel, and I thought I'd just run up and give you a reply to your invitation last night."

"Invitation?" he cried in surprise. "I gave you no invitation, did I, old fellow?"

"You certainly did! Don't you remember meeting me in the bar-room down-stairs last night, after you got back from the theater, and inviting me to accompany you to call upon some young ladies?"

"Oh, by Jove! I do remember now," cried Armstrong. "The Misses Langly. Oh, yes. Well?"

"Well, I've decided to go."

"The deuce you have!"

"Yes. Why not?"

"I fully expected that you would refuse to go, as you usually do; and, in fact, I rather hoped that you would."

"Well, I have not, as you see. But why did you hope that I would refuse to go?"

"Because I invited three others, each one with the expectation that none of the others would go. And now, if you insist upon going, I shall have to inform the others that they can't go, that's all."

"You will have to inform them, then," assured Thad, laughing; "because I insist upon going."

"All right, go you shall, old fellow. But, what's got into you all of a sudden? It usually takes a lawsuit to get you out to see a lady."

"I know it," returned Thad, "but I've turned over a new leaf. I'm going in for them strong, from this out."

"No idea of marrying?"

"I shouldn't wonder!"

"In that case I shall see that your attentions are directed toward the young lady that I am not engaged to."

"Don't be alarmed, old fellow," placated Thad, grasping his hand. "I sha'n't try to cut you out. What time? Eight o'clock, I s'pose?"

"Yes, eight sharp. I'm not so punctual myself, but these young ladies require punctuality, and if you want to get solid with them you've got to humor their whims."

"All right, I'll be on hand bright and early. Good-by!"

"Good-by!" drawled Armstrong. "I say," he called out, when Thad was about leaving the room, "haven't you forgotten something?"

A cold chill ran over the detective.

He had evidently neglected to do something that Nevin would have been sure to do. What could it be?

He ran over Nevin's peculiarities and habits in his mind, but, for the life of him, he could think of nothing he had neglected.

But just when he was on the point of despair Armstrong came to his rescue.

Taking out a twenty-dollar bill, and tossing it toward Thad, he said:

"Don't go to getting modest now, with your other newly-acquired virtues. If that isn't enough, say so; but don't come in my room and talk to me for half an hour and go out again without touching me for a little tip, or I shall either think you have lost your personality or that I have lost your friendship."

"Thanks, old fellow," replied Thad, somewhat surprised, but taking the proffered bill. "I had almost forgotten that little matter."

"I thought so. That enough?"

"For the present, yes. If I want any more to-night, I'll let you know. Good-by."

"Good-by."

When Thad reached the bar-room, he found Nevin pacing nervously up and down the floor. As soon as he saw Detective Burr his face assumed an expression of relief, and, running to him with extended hand, said:

"I'm so glad you've returned. I've been in a deuce of a muddle since you went up."

"How was that?" asked Thad.

"Why, you know those two fellows we saw on the corner?"

"Manton and Langly?"

"Yes. Well, they came in here a few minutes after you were gone, came up to me and said they wanted a little private talk with me. So we went into one of the reception-rooms and sat down, when they immediately began to abuse me, said I was a detective sneaking round other people's affairs, and that if I wanted to keep a whole skin I must keep away from them and theirs. Now, old fellow, what does it all mean? There's something wrong up the avenue, and you're on the scent. Am I right?"

Thad was taken so completely by surprise by all this that he was hardly able to reply.

Finally he said:

"You're such a good fellow, Nevin, and have gone so far to assist me, that I must take you into my confidence. There is something wrong up the avenue, but I have as little idea what it is as the man in the moon. Moreover, how these rascals managed to recognize me through my disguise is perfectly incomprehensible."

"Possibly they did not recognize you, but seeing me with Armstrong, led them to think I was pumping him."

"Or, what is more likely still," added Thad, "their guilty conscience makes them see a detective in every man that looks at them, and we did look at them pretty straight this morning."

"That may be it," assented Nevin, in a musing tone. "Well, under the circumstances, what about going up there to-night?"

"I'll go, if there are a dozen Colonel Mantons in the way, and they are twice as big."

Nevin was silent a moment. Finally he said:

"Go on. I have nothing to lose or gain in that quarter, so you may abuse my good name as much as you like, if it is going to do any good."

The friends left the hotel and strolled down Broadway together.

"By the way, I forgot to ask you how you came out with Armstrong," said Nevin, at last.

"Oh, capitally" said Thad. "Perhaps this is the best proof of my success," he continued, handing Nevin the twenty-dollar bill.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" cried Nevin in surprise. "How did you manage to get my habits down as fine as that?"

"Oh, it was no doing of mine, my boy. Your friend was surprised, though, that you should visit him without borrowing some money, and made the offer himself."

"He must have been surprised, if you started to leave the room without striking him for a loan. I forgot to mention that peculiarity of mine. Very important feature, and the ignorance of it might have betrayed you. Don't forget it another time when calling upon any of my friends in my stead."

They soon parted after this, Nevin going his way and the detective going to his apartments to change his make-up.

As he had several hours of spare time before him, he concluded to call at the house on Clinton Place from which he had seen the three women emerge.

For this expedition he made himself up as a middle-aged man, apparently well-to-do.

Taking a down-town car he was soon at Eighth street (Clinton Place.)

Going to the house from which he had seen the women come out, he consulted the names on the various letter-boxes to see if there was any which he thought would fit any of the three women, for it was a matter of guess-work entirely.

Finally he came to the name Mdme Vleric, and he rang her bell.

After waiting some time and finding that the door did not open, he rang again. Still the door did not open, and the caller was about turning away when a woman came out and, supposing that he wanted to go in, left the door open for him.

Thad went in and ascended the stairs.

Upon every door he looked for the name of Vleric, but nowhere could he see it.

Finally, however, he saw something quite as important, and something that made him shudder at the sight.

It was the letter L inclosed in a circle, stenciled upon the panel of the door, in red ink.

It was very small, and would not have been noticed by any one with less keen eyes than the detective, unless it was some one looking for the mystic sign.

The detective hesitated for a moment, and then knocked at the door.

There was no response, and he knocked again. Still there was no response, whereupon he knocked vigorously the third time.

Then he heard some one walking inside, and presently the door opened a few inches and a man's face appeared.

It was a brutal, repulsive face, sodden with drink and with blearied eyes; and the moment he opened the door a strong odor of whisky came out.

He eyed the detective suspiciously for a moment, and then growled:

"Wal, what d'y'e want?"

"Is Madam Vleric in?" asked Thad.

"No," growled the fellow, and was about to shut the door, when Thad asked:

"When will she be in?"

"Can't tell."

Again the fellow was about to shut the door, but the detective stopped him.

"I have important business with the madam, and there is big money in it for her," averred Thad. "It is important that I should see her, and that very soon. Now where and when can I see her?"

The fellow surveyed the visitor from head to foot, looked long and earnestly at his face, evidently suspecting that there was something wrong.

Finally he demanded:

"What's yer case?"

The question gave Thad a hint of something he had not thought of before, or if he had, only in a cursory way.

He might be wrong; but his only alternative now was to venture an answer. If he hit the mark, all well and good; if he missed, all was lost, for the present.

"Wife!" replied Thad.

"Oh," said the fellow reflectively. "Say, I'll tell ye what to do: You be out in Union Square to-morrow at plump two. Take a seat near the fountain and keep yer eyes peeled for a young woman that'll come along and stencil this on one of the seats," he said, handing Thad a small card on which the mysterious letter L with the circle around it, was stenciled. "As soon as you see her put that on a seat you will know it is the right woman and you may go up to and speak to her, when she'll probably fix a date and place where you kin talk business."

"Why can't you tell me what time she is likely to return and let me see her here?"

"Can't do it," growled the fellow. "She don't do no business hyar, an' ye'll either hev to do as I said or not do no business wid her. See?"

Although Thad would have given much to get inside the rooms, he saw that such a thing was out of the question for the present, and decided to content himself with what he had gained and bide his time.

And while he was deliberating, short as the time was, the fellow concluded that the interview was at an end and shut the door; so the detective had nothing to do but walk downstairs.

Thad had noticed in various places about the city where his business had taken him, a peculiar looking boy. While his hair and features showed him to be a negro, or to have negro blood in his veins, his complexion was white almost to chalkiness, which caused his unusually large black eyes to appear larger than they actually were. There was a melancholy expression in his face which changed to something like malignancy or hate while you looked at him. Thad had noticed him standing about in several different places, apparently paying no attention to anybody, or having no object in view; and now, as the detective came out of the apartment-house, the first living being he caught sight of was this "white nigger."

On previous occasions he had given the matter very little thought, owing to his mind being occupied with other things, but now the sight of the boy caused him a thrill of suspicion; something about the lad suggested the sneak and spy.

Thad was determined to know more about this shadower, and approached him, when the boy started to run.

This convinced Detective Burr that his surmises were correct, so he increased his speed and soon caught the lad by the collar.

"Now, young man," he said, "I want you to tell me who you are and where you live."

The boy was silent and assumed a dogged expression.

"Come, no nonsense, unless you want to be locked up."

This evidently frightened him for his face assumed a pitiful expression.

"Please, sir, don't lock me up and I won't do it no more!" he whined.

"Then you confess that you have been following me?"

"Yes, sir, but I couldn't help it. Burt made me do it."

"Who is Burt?"

"Burt Manion."

"The fellow up-stairs?"

"Yes, sir. But, please don't talk to me here. If they see me talking to you they'll kill me. I'll come any place you say to-night after ten and tell you all about it."

A moment's study of the boy's face convinced Thad that he could trust him.

"All right," he assented; "I will trust you. Come to No. — Thirteenth street after eleven to-night. But, don't disappoint me or you will be sorry for it. You can't go any place but I will find you."

"Oh, you can trust me, sir—indeed you can. I know you too well to dare to try to deceive you."

"You know me?" repeated Thad, in surprise.

"Yes, sir. You're Mr. Burr, the detective."

"How do you know that?"

"I'll tell you when I come round to-night," answered the boy, nervously, keeping his eye on the tenement-house.

"Very well, my lad," releasing him. "What is your name?"

"Chalky Nig."

"That is a queer name."

"Yes, sir; but it's all the one I've got," whined the boy, preparing to go.

"All right, Chalky. Eleven, remember."

"Yes, sir."

And the strange being darted away and disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

A BEAUTIFUL FIEND.

THAD just about had time, after leaving the boy, to dress, make himself up as Horace Nevin, and eat an early dinner, before it was time to call upon Armstrong at the hotel.

When he reached Armstrong's room he found that young gentleman in a state of nervous excitement, pacing up and down the room like a caged animal.

"Look here, Nev," were his first words, holding an unfolded letter between his gloved fingers, "what the deuce does this mean, old fellow?"

"Perhaps I can tell you better when I know what it is," rejoined Thad, with Nevin's peculiar laugh.

"Read the letter, then, read the letter, my boy," cried Armstrong, excitedly, "and for God's sake, tell me the meaning of it."

Thad took the letter and glanced over it. It was a matter of surprise to him, but if he felt the agitation of Armstrong he didn't show it. On the contrary he never appeared cooler or more self-possessed in his life.

The letter was as follows:

"DEAR ARMSTRONG:—

"Beware of the party, with whom you are associating, calling himself Nevin. He is not what he represents himself to be. He is a fraud. In other words, to be more plain, he is a detective in disguise, and his object is to ruin us all. Do not, above all things, allow him to accompany you to call upon the Misses Langly. What he expects to find there is a mystery, as you know the family to be one of the best in the city. My idea is, that he is trying to discover some grounds upon which to found a case of blackmail."

"Sit down upon him at once."

"Your friend,

"CLAUDE HEPWORTH."

Matters looked pretty serious for the invincible. It seemed as though he was being hemmed in on all sides. Another in his position would have given up then and there; but Thad Burr wasn't made of that kind of stuff.

He had started into this thing, as he always did into anything—to win; and he knew that success depended upon coolness and courage; and he knew that there was never a moment in his life when he required more of both, coupled with that commodity vulgarly called "cheek," than at the present, and he nerved himself accordingly.

He had paused but a moment after reading the letter, but Armstrong, in his impatience, noticed even this, and said:

"Well?"

By way of reply the detective burst out laughing.

"This is very good," he exclaimed. "So I am not Nevin, after all. Then who the deuce am I?"

Armstrong eyed him very sharply for a moment, and then also burst out laughing.

"The fellow's an idiot!" he spoke at last.

"Perhaps not, my boy," suggested Thad. "Perhaps he is right, and that I am not Nevin. Perhaps it would be well to call upon Charles Nevin, the jeweler, who is supposed to be my brother, and have him identify me."

"Nonsense!" cried Armstrong, with an embarrassed expression. "I'll do nothing of the kind. The fellow must think I'm blind or the idiot that he is, not to know my old friend," grasping Thad's hand. "Forgive—Great Scott!" he exclaimed, looking at Thad's hand.

"What's the matter, old fellow?" asked Thad, calmly, although he did not feel entirely at ease at that moment.

"Nothing—that is—nothing," returned Armstrong, dropping Thad's hand, and drawing his own across his brow. "For a moment I would have sworn it; but, I know I am wrong. The cursed letter has upset me a little, that's all."

"But, what about the hand, my friend?" insisted the detective. "What would you have sworn to?"

"That—that the hand was at least two sizes smaller than yours. You know how I always joked you about your large hands?"

"Yes, and you have a right to; although I notice that the new style of gloves I have been wearing have materially reduced the size of my hand."

"You don't say!" cried the other, with an expression of relief. "Then it was not entirely fancy on my part."

"Not at all, my friend."

At that moment Armstrong's carriage was announced, and the young man, after casting a somewhat anxious look at Thad, said:

"Well, Nev, let's go!"

"See here, Fred," urged Thad, who had not failed to catch the full meaning of the glance, "perhaps I had better not go."

"Why not?" demanded Armstrong, turning abruptly upon him.

"Why, the fact is, if I am going to compromise you—"

"Compromise, and be hanged to them!" cried the other, whose blood was up now. "Do they imagine that they are going to bluff me with a cock-and-bull story like that? I believe my social standing is worth something, and I don't think any of these people can afford to throw

me away on account of the company I keep. More than that, I wish to let them know that any place my friends are not welcome is no place for me. Come on, Nev."

They took the elevator and went down stairs, and a few minutes later were on their way up Fifth avenue.

Armstrong soon regained his spirits, and chatted along pleasantly.

Thad tried, in a casual way so as not to arouse his suspicions, to draw him out on the subject of the family they were about to visit, but he appeared to know very little about them, or desired to keep what he knew to himself.

"There are two young ladies, sisters, where we are going, I believe," Thad remarked indifferently.

"Yes," returned Armstrong. "Miss Victoria and Miss Alice."

"Both young and beautiful, of course?"

"Yes. Victoria, the eldest, is the prettiest, but I like the other one the best. She is the most sensible. Victoria is like a child; she doesn't seem to know anything about the world at all."

"That is not unnatural in a young and innocent girl," observed Thad.

"No, to some extent, perhaps. But I like to see a woman know something."

"Are there any more in the family?"

"Yes, two sons; one lives at home, and the other away. Then there are the father and mother."

"Is the son who lives away married?"

"Yes."

"And the one that lives at home?"

"I don't know."

"Do you ever meet him during your calls?"

"Sometimes, not often."

"And it never occurred to you to ask whether he was married or not?"

"No, strange as it may seem, I never did," replied Armstrong, reflectively. "Although somehow I got it into my head that he was married, and had his wife in the house, but I never saw her."

By this time they had arrived at the house, and the two gentlemen alighted, ascended the steps and rung the bell. The door was opened by a stately footman in livery, and they were ushered into a magnificent drawing-room.

They were left alone for a few minutes to await the arrival of the ladies, and Thad had a chance to look about him. He had never seen anything quite so grand in his life.

Among the splendid pictures were several portraits, one of which in particular attracted Thad's attention. It was of a beautiful woman, and it had such an impression upon him that he rose unconsciously and walked up in front of it to have a better view of it.

There, he still stood, rapt in the charm of admiration, when the two young ladies came in, and he was only aroused from his reverie when his name was called to be introduced, and he turned to behold the original of the picture he had just been admiring which was Victoria, a beautiful woman, with black hair and eyes and a rich olive, almost Italian, complexion. Her lips were a trifle thick and sensual and as red as carmine, and her teeth were like ivory.

Her sister, as Armstrong had remarked, was not so handsome. In fact, she was scarcely above plainness; a soft-eyed, brown-haired, kittenish little woman, such as you would never turn your head for a second look at, and as only looks at home in the nursery.

The moment the ceremony of introduction was over Miss Victoria said, with a rippling laugh:

"So you were admiring that hideous image of my unattractive face, were you?"

The woman's vanity could not have been better illustrated than by this palpable bid for a compliment.

But, as the detective was there for a purpose, he fell in with the spirit of his surroundings, and said:

"For shame, Miss Langly! Whatever sin the artist has committed in his attempt to put you on canvas, do not imitate his example by decrying both his work and nature's, both of which are well-nigh perfect."

"This is the rankest kind of flattery, Mr. Nevin," she retorted, pouting, "and I'll hear no more of it."

"No offense should be taken, Miss Langly, when one speaks the simple truth. However, as you request it, we will drop the subject. Who is the other pretty lady there, near the corner?"

"That," she replied, with a slight curl of her pretty lip, "is my sweet sister-in-law, Ida Langly; and lest you should ask any more tiresome questions about this person, I will tell you now that she is ill, has been for nearly two months and is not expected to live."

"Indeed! I am very sorry; but, don't hope to silence me on the subject with those few answers, my dear lady—"

"Oh, of course, you want to know what is the matter with her, and I have the pleasure of informing you that I do not know; and that, in that respect, I am quite as wise as the doctor, for he doesn't know, either."

Thad could not repress a shudder at the utter coldness and heartlessness of the woman. Still he believed by judicious handling she could be

induced to yield some points of information that he could not otherwise obtain.

"You do not appear to be grieving yourself to death over the illness and probable dissolution of your sister-in-law," he observed after a slight pause.

"No. It isn't my nature to take things seriously. Besides, there is no woman, unless she be a monstrosity or an idiot, who does not experience a certain innate exultation at the death of any other beautiful woman."

"In other words," added Thad, laughing, "every beautiful woman in the universe looks upon every other beautiful woman as her rival, and would rejoice to see her out of the way."

"That is the case, frankly stated," she assented, "though you will not find many willing to admit it."

"True enough, Miss Langly. But, you will excuse me for happening to be differently constructed. The very intelligence that somebody is ill throws me into a spasm of sympathy. You may think it strange, but the being told that this lady is ill has made me very uncomfortable, and I shall not experience any relief until I know more about her."

"I am very sorry for you, then, for I have told you absolutely all I know. I never visit sick rooms and never question doctors or nurses. One interferes with your appetite and the other with your dignity."

"Then you probably could not even tell me her nurse's or her doctor's name?"

Thad was a little curious to know how she would receive this, and he was a little nervous about the result, but he had no reason to be.

She looked him straight in the eye for an instant and then answered with a query:

"Would you really like to know?"

"Indeed I would."

"Then you shall, for really you are almost as much of a crank as myself, Mr. Nevin, and I like you on that account."

She then called a servant and dispatched her to the sick room for the desired information. The servant soon returned with the statement that the doctor's name was Peters and that of the nurse Annie Montroi. Thad made a mental note of the fact, and the subject of conversation was changed.

"Let us go into the conservatory," urged Victoria, "as the others have gone in there."

"With pleasure."

They strolled into the conservatory, an immense place, lined with the choicest flowers, plants and orchids. When they entered Thad noticed a girl busily engaged with the plants and flowers in some way. She was very pale, and so small and thin that the detective mistook her for a child at first, but when they came near her on their way round Victoria introduced her as Miss Seymour.

And scarcely was she through with the introduction when a servant came in and announced that somebody wanted to see Miss Victoria, and she excused herself and left Thad in the company of the little lady.

They chatted along pleasantly for a little while, when it became apparent to the detective that there was something familiar either about the girl herself or the style of her speaking. All of a sudden it came to him.

They were in a secluded nook where nobody could see or hear them, and Thad remarked in a low tone, as though speaking to one of the flowers:

"The trouble will be in getting into the house; but, once inside, I can and will help you!"

He glanced at little Miss Seymour and saw that he had hit the mark! She was paler, if possible, than usual, and terribly agitated.

When their eyes met, she put her thin, white hands upon his arm, and, glancing about in a frightened manner, said, in a hoarse whisper:

"Then you are Mr.—, the detective? I thought Miss Victoria called you Nevin?"

"Never mind about the name, Miss Seymour," returned Thad, softly. "What is there going on in this house, that you want me to investigate?"

"Oh, sir!" she cried, still in a hoarse whisper, and looking more frightened than ever. "Do you think we can save her?"

"Whom?"

"The poor dear lady up there!"

"Well, what about her?" asked the Invincible, mystified at her manner.

"THEY ARE MURDERING HER!"

CHAPTER V. THE PLOT.

THAD was so astounded at what he heard that he could not speak for a moment.

He had stumbled upon the clew for which he had been looking, so suddenly that it took his breath away, so to speak.

It did not take long for him to recover his self-possession.

"Then you are the little lady who wrote me the letter, are you?" he asked, in a low tone.

"Yes; but for Heaven's sake do not mention the fact here, or elsewhere!" she pleaded, in deep anxiety—almost fright.

"Not for the world. But you spoke of your

position here, Miss Seymour. What is your position, may I ask?"

"Only that of governess, sir," she answered, bashfully.

"To whom?"

"Mr. Robert Langly's children."

"And who is this lady whom you say they are murdering?"

"Mrs. Ida Langly, Robert's wife."

"What makes you think they are murdering her, Miss Seymour?"

"Because, two or three months ago she and her husband had a violent quarrel, and he threatened to leave her. A few days afterward, however, they appeared to make it up, but I know it was all make-believe on his part, although she was sincere enough. Then he had her life insured for a large sum, and almost immediately after this she took sick, and has been getting gradually worse ever since."

"They only have the one doctor, and I don't believe he knows anything, or if he does, he is in league with the other murderers."

"Who do you mean by the others?"

"Why, the three nurses, or pretended nurses, and Mr. Langly. Yes, and *she*, too—Miss Victoria! She is as cold and heartless as a stone, and would take delight in killing anybody, I verily believe."

"Do you know the names of these nurses?"

"Yes, sir; the oldest one's name is Madame Vleric, the next oldest is Sarah Coburn, and the young one's name is Annie Montroi."

"Well, the best thing to be done is for you to make complaint, Miss Seymour—to make an affidavit as to your suspicions, and we'll have all these parties arrested. Then we can have good physicians examine the patient, and if they discover that she has been maltreated in any way, these people will be tried for criminal conspiracy."

"I would like to do that, sir—oh! I'd like to do that so much, but my position, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Nevin here, please," warned the Invincible.

"Mr. Nevin. I have so much depending upon me, a sick mother and four brothers and sisters to support out of my wages, and if I should lose my position, what would become of us?"

"How did you calculate to help the lady, then?" asked Thad

"There is but one way to help her, sir."

"And that is—"

"To get her away."

"What do you mean?"

"Get her out of this house, away from these people, until she has recovered. In the mean time, you can have these nurses and all of them arrested."

"What is the condition of the lady? Is she able to travel?"

"She is very weak, but with assistance, I think, could be got into a carriage, and then, as soon as a good physician gets hold of her she will revive and soon be strong. As soon, in fact, as he could get this poison out of her system."

"Then you think they are poisoning her, do you?" said Thad.

"I know it—slowly poisoning her!"

Thad was silent for a moment. Finally he said:

"Miss Seymour, I am afraid your plan is impracticable. It would be next to impossible to get the lady, in her feeble condition, out of the house without detection. If we are detected in the act they can call the first policeman at hand to arrest us for criminal abduction, and we would have hard work to prove our innocence."

"But she is willing to go, *anxious!*"

"Have you talked to her about it?"

"Oh, yes, sir, often."

"Still, that would be nothing in our favor. They could easily say that the lady was demented and didn't know what she was saying. I'll tell you, Miss Seymour, you had better leave this matter to me. You can aid me, though. First of all, we must find out for certain whether the lady's malady is the result of some kind of poison which is being administered to her by these people, and for that purpose I must get into the sick chamber and investigate."

"That would be impossible, sir, for you. It's as much as the bargain that I can get in for a few minutes at a time to speak to her about the children."

"Don't worry, Miss Seymour, about that; I will manage that well enough. Now, tell me, does this Madame Vleric stay here most of the time?"

"No, sir, only at night. Mrs. Coburn usually stays during the day; but sometimes Annie Montroi stays during the day."

"Is the old woman here every night?"

"No, sir, not lately. At first she was here all night and part of the day; then she got to coming just at night, and now she doesn't always come at night."

"The other two are generally here at night, are they?"

"No, sir, there is generally only one, and that is usually Mrs. Coburn, and she might as well not be here, as she sleeps all the time nearly."

"Very well, I think we can arrange it, then," said Thad. "Here is my plan: I will disguise as a woman and come as a substitute for Mad-

ame Vleric. In that way I can discover the methods and motives of these people in one night."

"But do you think you can make Mrs. Coburn believe that you have been sent by Madame Vleric?" asked Miss Seymour, anxiously.

"Oh, as to that, I can have a written letter of introduction from the madam."

"Gh, dear," sighed the little lady. "You detectives are about as clever in deception as the criminals themselves."

"That is necessary, Miss Seymour," assured Thad, laughing. "But, there is one more question I want to ask you: Does Mr. Robert Langly visit the sick chamber often?"

"Very seldom."

"Is he not away from home a good deal?"

"He is, sir, most of the time."

"He has a friend with whom he spends a good deal of time, a Colonel Manton; do you know him or of him Miss Seymour?"

"I should think I ought to," responded the little lady, blushing slightly. "He is my uncle."

"You don't tell me!" cried Thad in surprise. "It is strange that he doesn't do something for you. He is rich, isn't he?"

"Not now," she answered, a little sadly. "He used to be; but he has lost heavily in the last few years, so that he is now comparatively a poor man. Still, uncle does all he can for us. He has offered me a home in case anything should happen to deprive me of one."

At this point Armstrong and Alice, who had been too much absorbed in each other to notice anybody else all evening, suddenly turned a corner of one of the aisles of the conservatory and came upon Thad and Miss Seymour.

It seemed that they had not been aware all this time that Victoria had gone and left the detective to be entertained by the governess, and they were surprised at finding them together.

"Why, Nev, me boy, how does this come?" cried Armstrong. "How does it happen that you are left to the mercies of the—the governess?"

"Miss Victoria had a call somewhere else," explained Thad. "But with all deference to her, I must say that my entertainment by Miss Seymour has been such as to fully requite me for Miss Victoria's loss."

"I have no doubt of it," was spoken at Thad's back; and turning he saw Miss Victoria herself standing there. "But," she went on, laughing, "I am not in the least offended for I am aware that Florence is a better conversationalist than I, nor jealous, for she isn't the least bit pretty. Let us return to the drawing-room."

And Miss Seymour was left alone again.

The conversation was general for a while, and Victoria was unusually spirited and witty in her conversation, and extremely sarcastic, first joking Armstrong and Alice upon their approaching nuptials, and next making a fling at Thad about his supposed fascination for the plain-faced little governess.

After a while, however, she pretended to become very much interested in "Mr. Nevin," and devoted herself exclusively to him.

He did not fail to notice the peculiarity of which Armstrong had spoken, namely, the woman's ignorance of everything practical.

She asked all such questions as why they put the poor horses in front of a street-car, and why the law didn't interfere with butchers for killing "poor innocent animals," and yet in music, poetry and painting she appeared as much at home as a virtuoso.

Finally she arose and asked "Mr. Nevin" for a word with him in private.

Without the least suspicion of what she meant, the detective readily complied, and after excusing themselves they withdrew into a small private parlor.

As soon as Thad was inside she closed the door and locked it; and then turning upon him, said:

"Well, Mr. Thaddeus Burr, your masquerade has been conducted very cleverly. I admire your genius, and it really goes against me to spoil the illusion that you have been entirely successful. I dislike to wound your vanity to that extent, but you must remember that I have vanity of my own, and therefore could not resist telling you that I knew you from the moment I caught sight of you."

Thad was satisfied that the last statement was false; that she only knew him through the warning giving her, possibly, by the same person who wrote the letter to Armstrong!

Still the exposure had come upon him so suddenly, and unexpectedly, that it disconcerted him for the moment; but, seeing that it would be useless to deny his identity to this woman, who he now saw was as cunning and subtle as she had pretended to be ignorant, he decided to put on a bold face and make the most of it.

"Well," he said, with a smile and polite bow, "you cannot admire my genius more than I do your penetration, Miss Langly. Nobody is readier to acknowledge an equal than myself. You yourself are a remarkably clever adept at dissimulation. At this very moment your intended brother-in-law believes you to be as innocent in worldly matters as a babe, and, although I never put any faith in your pretended innocence, I

never fully realized the extreme of your subtlety until now."

"So, then, you were looking behind my mask at the same time I was looking behind yours, were you?"

"That is about it."

"Very well," she returned, with a bitter smile. "Honors are even, so far. Now, look here, Mr. Burr: I, also, know why you are in this house. I know your motive in imposing upon that poor, simple Armstrong, and getting yourself introduced here as one of his friends. And yet I have thrown nothing in the way of your success. I even assisted you to the extent of throwing you in the company of the little governess, the soft-hearted little simpleton that wrote to you and gave you your first intimation of what was going on."

"Pardon me, Miss Langly," interrupted the detective. "You are extremely cunning and well posted on my affairs; but there is where you make a serious blunder. The letter was not my first intimation of the horrible crime you are committing."

This was said in Thad's gentlest and politest tones, and it was all the more cutting for that reason. Victoria bit her lip to stifle her anger, but the next instant she smiled sweetly as she answered:

"You do well to say the crime that I am committing. It is my crime, and I glory in it! I relish, as a delicious draught, every pang, every twinge of agony that she suffers. Do you know why? Because I hate her! And why do I hate her? Because she was beautiful, and came between me and mine. Oh, I love to hate, Mr. Burr! And do you imagine that I am going to allow you to interfere with my plans?"

"I am sorry to say, Miss Langly, that I think you will," averred Thad, with imperturbable decision.

She made no immediate reply, but the look that she gave him contained all the fiendishness of a pythoness.

"Do you dare to oppose me, Thaddeus Burr?" she fairly hissed.

"Assuredly, Miss Langly."

"Do you know what you are doing?" the beautiful fiend cried.

"I think so."

"You will never leave this room alive!" and a dagger flashed in her hand, raised high above her head. But, as if alert for some such act on her part, the wary detective grasped her spiteful wrist, and, holding it a moment in his steel-like clasp, the weapon dropped harmlessly to the floor. The baffled schemer glared at him like a fiend for an instant, while his eyes seemed to fathom her very soul; then she burst into a peal of laughter, while he, releasing her wrist, stooped and picked up the slender-bladed knife and deliberately placed it in his hip-pocket.

"Let us return to the drawing-room, Mr. Nevin, they may wonder at our long absence," and she slipped her arm within his, as she spoke.

They returned in an apparently cheerful mood, chatting as gayly as two fast friends, and during the rest of the evening she addressed him as Mr. Nevin, and no one would have guessed from her actions that she even suspected that he was other than her admirer and friend.

As Thad left the house he slipped the dagger into Victoria's hand.

CHAPTER VI.

TOUCHING A VERY TENDER SPOT.

As Thad and young Armstrong rode away from the Langly residence, the latter said:

"Well, what do you think of Victoria?"

"She is rather a brilliant woman," returned Thad; "and certainly very handsome."

"Yes; but did you ever see her equal for innocence in regard to matters of every-day life?"

"She is very innocent; or pretends to be," was replied.

"Pretends?" cried Armstrong, coloring.

"What do you mean?"

Burr was silent for a moment, and then turning suddenly upon his young companion he answered:

"See here, Armstrong, I have half a mind to make a confidant of you. Can I trust you, old fellow?"

"What are you driving at?" demanded the young man, more astonished than ever, and more than half-offended.

"I'll tell you what I mean, my boy," laying his hand gently upon the young man's arm; "but you must give me your word of honor that you will mention what I tell you to nobody. Do you promise?"

"That depends—"

"Oh, no; there must be no 'depends' about it. Before I tell you a word I must have your promise that what I say will go no further."

After a brief and somewhat dogged silence, the young man resumed his usual cheerful expression.

"All right, Nev, old boy, you have my solemn promise."

"I also want you to promise not to get angry at what I am going to tell you."

"I don't believe I can promise that, especially if you say anything derogatory of the character

of those young ladies; but I'll promise not to get violent."

"Very well, I'll risk you," laughing. "It is with regard to the young ladies, or rather Victoria, that I wish to speak. You spoke of her just now as being so innocent, and I said 'or pretended to be.' Now, I want to tell you, my friend, that it is all put on!"

"Stop!" cried Armstrong. "You are a friend, Nevin, but you must not say anything against that girl; I won't have it."

"Calm yourself, my boy, be reasonable. Hear what I have to say, and then if you can disprove it, cut my acquaintance, or my throat, which ever suits you best."

After another silence, Armstrong answered:

"Go on, old man. I sha'n't believe a word you tell me; but I know you to be too good a fellow to speak disparagingly of any one, unless you had a reason for it, or an imaginary one. Go on."

"Well, to go back to where I was before," said Thad, "you believe Victoria to be the real soul of innocence. So did I—although I must say I suspected that she was acting a part of it—until she told me with her own lips what she is. You cannot be more horrified at what I tell you than I was at her avowal. My boy, she is as subtle as cruel, and as heartless as Lady Macbeth; and, moreover, she has seen more of the world, and knows it better than either of us."

"That is a—"

"Hold on. Wait till I'm done. That woman has tasted the sweet and bitter of every sin in the calendar—"

"Stop, or I'll—"

"And now, my friend, she is a self-confessed murderer!"

"It's a lie!" cried Armstrong, vehemently. "An infamous lie! And I am astonished at the want of manhood that allows you to utter such a thing!"

"Hold on, Armstrong," commanded the detective, firmly, grasping his arm in such a way as to convince the young man of his earnestness; "do not become insolent, or I may lose my temper. You admitted that I would not say anything against the young lady unless I had a reason for it. Now, what motive could I have for slandering her?"

"I can think of none; and yet it all seems so terrible, so contrary to her nature."

"To her assumed nature, yes. See here, my boy, do you know where Robert Langly's wife is?"

"I do not. I never bother my head about other people's business."

"That is a very good motto sometimes—not always. Well, I'll tell you where she is, and where she will be soon, if something is not done in her behalf. She is there in the house, and an invalid, so-called, but the fact is, they are killing her by inches."

"What do you mean?" demanded Armstrong, turning pale.

"That they are poisoning her gradually. They—I say they, because I do not know yet who is at the head of it—have employed three women as nurses. Now, why should they have three nurses for one sick woman?"

"Bless my soul!" cried Armstrong, almost faint with astonishment, "I didn't know they had any nurses in the house, or invalids either."

"I'll tell you why they have there three nurses. They are all professional poisoners—every one with a record!"

"What?"

"Professional poisoners."

"Why—why, I never heard of such a thing," avowed Armstrong, in a terrible state of agitation.

"Very few other people, until recently," assured Thad. "Nevertheless, it is a regular profession, the same as anything else. If a man has a wife whom he wishes to get rid of, or a woman has a husband of whom she is tired or can't get on with comfortably, all he or she has to do is to make a contract with these people and, for so much, they will put the objectionable wife or husband out of the way."

"This is terrible," exclaimed Armstrong. "But here we are at the hotel. Come up and we will discuss this subject further. If there is anything in it I want to know it, as I expect soon to become a member of the family."

As soon as they reached Armstrong's room, the young man sunk into an easy-chair without stopping to remove his overcoat or hat, and motioned the detective to another seat.

"This is awful!" he groaned, "if true. But, supposing Robert Langly to be wicked and heartless enough to do such a thing, and supposing that he has a motive, what has Victoria to do with the affair?"

"That I do not fully understand—just at present."

"Then," his face lighting up with hope, "how do you know that she has anything to do with it?"

"Because she told me she had—confessed the awful fact."

"My God!" groaned the young man, burying his face in his hands, "this is another confirmation of what I have been told so often, that this woman looked upon me as little more than a

child or an idiot. To think that I should be in the house almost every day and know nothing of this, while you are there but once and only a couple of hours then, and make all these discoveries. Stop a bit!" he cried suddenly. "Hasn't that governess been talking to you about this matter?"

"Yes, but I did not derive all my information from her. I had an inkling of the fearful scheme before I entered the house. The governess carried me a little further toward the light; and then Victoria confirmed the whole business by volunteering a confession."

"That is strange," muttered Armstrong, half musingly. "What did you do to her to induce her, or rather force her to confess to you?"

"Nothing. And in fact, it was less a confession than a boast. I'll tell you, my boy: You remember what your friend wrote you about me?"

"Yes."

"Well, she had heard the same thing, and believing me to be a detective, took me into the private parlor, as you saw, and, after charging me with being a detective, boasted that she was the criminal and that she was proud of it."

"Of course you corrected the statement, told her that you were not a detective, didn't you?"

"I did nothing of the kind."

"Why not?"

"Oh, she appeared to be so well satisfied with herself, and took so much satisfaction in her imaginary knowledge, that I thought it would be a pity to disabuse her mind."

Thad had been on the point of confessing who he was and asking the young man's co-operation, but, after a little reflection, he concluded that it would be bad policy. A person so shallow that he could be imposed upon as he had been would only be a stumbling-block in his way.

However, having opened his friend's eyes as to the true status of affairs, the young man, stupid as he was, might stumble upon something.

"So you never suspected anything wrong of Victoria, eh?" continued Thad.

"No," replied the other. "I believed her one of the purest of women. I'll tell you what I did suspect, though," he went on after a pause, "or rather, I should say, an impression I somehow received, and that was, that she had been married some time and had been unhappy in consequence, and I thought all the more of her for it, that is, sympathized with her."

"Tell me, old fellow," urged Thad, suddenly turning upon him, "were you just a trifle more in love with Victoria than you were with Alice?"

Armstrong was silent.

He colored and grew terribly confused.

Finally he stammered:

"I—I don't know; I—"

"Confess it, old man," cried Thad, laughing. "You know you were, and there is just where the shoe pinches. You love her to distraction, and she returns your affection by treating you as though you were a child or an idiot. Am I not right?"

"I'm afraid you are, old fellow," admitted Armstrong bumbly; "but it is a humiliating confession to make. As for Alice, while I know her to be a good girl, and have a very high regard for her, I can never love her as I do Victoria, and the worst of it is, she knows it. What had we better do?"

"Go right on as though nothing had ever happened, but keep your eyes and ears open. Find out all you can and tell me. Above all, discover, if possible, whether your theory about Victoria being married is correct or not, and if it is, find out who her husband was, and whether he is still living or not. And leave the rest to me."

"All right," dejectedly. "But don't you think, Nevin, that we had better get a regular detective to work upon the case, instead of trying to play detective ourselves?"

"No, I think not," replied Thad, laughing heartily at the fellow's simplicity. "I am something of a detective myself, and I like it."

"Blessed if you aren't a pretty good detective," declared Armstrong, with sudden energy. "For I don't believe there are three of the fraternity in New York who would have learned as much as you have this night."

"Perhaps; and now, my friend," said Thad, rising, "I must go. Do as I tell you, and we will sift this matter to the bottom; and if we can find that Victoria is innocent—"

"Oh, if we only can!" cried Armstrong, grasping the detective's hand. "But that can never be. Oh, Nevin, why did I ever take you to the house to make this horrible discovery?"

"Didn't you want to know the truth, Fred, my boy?" asked Thad in a kindly tone, squeezing his hand warmly.

"No, Nevin, no; a thousand times no!" cried Armstrong, bursting into tears. "I would rather she had poisoned me than to have known the horrible truth!"

"But you didn't expect to marry her, did you, my boy?"

"Certainly not; I gave up that idea long ago. But that did not prevent me from loving her, which I should have done to the end of time; but now I can't even do that."

"Oh, well, my boy, the thing cannot be helped now. I thought I was doing you a kindness by telling you the truth, and I still believe that it

will be for your good in the end. Still, I sympathize with you, old fellow. Good-by. Try to forget her."

"That I never can do," sobbed Armstrong. "Good-by. By the way, will you call up there again?"

"No, I think I had better not. But I'll see you again soon. Good-by."

And, after wringing the young man's hand, the detective took his leave.

When he reached the ground floor he found Nevin waiting for him.

"Well, old fellow, how did you make out?" were Nevin's first words.

"Capitally," replied Thad. "This night's work is worth a good deal."

"Ten, for instance?"

Thad took the hint, and putting his hand into his pocket, took out a ten-dollar bill and handed it to him.

"Yes, it was worth that," Thad said, "and more if you want it."

"Thank you, no," returned Nevin, with a show of dignity. "Another time, perhaps. This is ample at present. How did you like that beauty—what's her name?—Victoria?"

"Oh, she's a fine woman; beautiful as a May morning and sparkling as a bottle of champagne, but—but—"

"I know what you were going to say, innocent, or, perhaps more correctly speaking, ignorant. Yes, I have heard Armstrong speak of her."

"Yes, she is extremely innocent, from Armstrong's point of view—or was. I think he has changed his mind a trifle though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, perhaps you had better ask him. He can tell you better than I."

"Very well. By the way, did you find anything wrong at the house?"

"Yes, a little. I'll tell you all about it pretty soon now. How have you made out in the mean time? Have you seen any more of your men?"

"Indeed I have. You were just driving away from the hotel when I was entering the saloon and met Manton and Langly together. They had seen you enter the carriage with Armstrong and thought it was I, so as soon as they saw me they commenced laughing at me—thinking it was you, of course—and said that I had been bluffed out of going to the house. I took it all in good part and pretended that what they said was true. Say, Burr, those fellows are a couple of scoundrels, do you know it?"

"Yes, or believe it, and have for some time. Now, Nevin, I want to tell you something in strict confidence. The reason I tell you will be apparent in a moment. Robert Langly is murdering his wife, or having it done, and—"

"What?"

"Never mind getting excited now. I had a hint of the affair and that is what took me to the house. I discovered enough to confirm my suspicions. Now, young Armstrong still believes that you accompanied him, and as he has promised to do a little detective work at the house, the chances are he will be telling you the result of his investigations. If he does, say nothing, make a mental note of what he tells you and give it to me, please."

"I'll do it," said Nevin.

"And now I must bid you good-night," said Thad grasping his hand.

"Good-night, Thad."

CHAPTER VII.

THE MEANING OF THE MYSTIC SIGN.

WHEN Thad reached his quarters it was not far from midnight. He was therefore a little surprised to find some one on the stoop waiting for him.

It was Chalky Nig.

In the whirl of exciting events of the evening the strange creature had slipped clear out of the detective's memory.

The little fellow had been waiting there for over two hours, and as the night was a trifle chilly, he was drawn up into a knot, shivering and half asleep.

However, the approach of the detective aroused him, and he got up, stretched himself, yawned, and said:

"Is that you, sir?"

"Heilo, my lad!" cried Thad, in surprise. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long."

"Oh, I ain't been here but two hours, sir," replied the boy cheerfully, although his teeth chattered when he spoke.

"Well, that is about long enough to get cold, isn't it, my boy?"

"Yes, sir."

"Come up-stairs, and we'll soon get warm," said Thad kindly.

The lad, without another word, followed him up into the studio.

When the detective had struck a light, Chalky, at his request, sat down.

For a few moments he was silent and appeared to have some terrible weight on his mind.

Finally he spoke:

"Mr. Burr, are you rich?"

"No, my boy, not very," replied Thad, surprised at the question. "Why do you ask?"

Thad Burr, the Invincible.

"Because, sir, I can tell you how you can make lots of money."

"How?"

"Have my life insured, sir."

"Why, you don't expect to die soon, do you?" asked Thad, still more surprised.

"Yes, sir."

"How is that?"

"Why, sir, as soon as they finds out that I told you their secrets, they'll kill me."

"Oh, no, I don't think so."

"I know they will."

"But, I won't let them."

"You can't prevent them, sir; and—and I don't want you to."

"Don't want me to keep them from killing you?"

"No, sir."

"Why not?"

"Why, you see, sir, I have no friends; I don't know even who my parents were, if I ever had any, and I have never had anything but abuse since I can remember, and I don't want to live; I'd rather die."

"Nonsense, my boy! You mustn't feel like that. I will not only keep them from killing you, but I will make you want to live. So let us not speak of these things now. How long have you been with these people?"

"I don't know, sir. Always, I guess."

"Did they ever send you to school?"

"No, sir, the madame didn't want me to go to school. She thought I would get to know too much, neither did Burt Manion; but Annie thought I ought to learn to read, and so she taught me."

"Who is Annie?"

"She's the youngest one—the pretty one."

"What relation is she to Madame Vleric?"

"Her daughter."

"Then she must have been married, as her name is Montroi."

"Yes, sir, she has been married; but her mother made her leave her husband and live with Burt, because he makes lots of money for the old woman. Burt was married, too, to a beautiful woman; but she left him after he was arrested one time for burglary."

"What kind of business are they engaged in, now?" asked Thad.

"They call it Lesser. That is French for 'let,' and it means to kill."

"How do they do it, my boy?"

"You could never guess," answered Chalky, looking up suddenly.

"I should say poisoning," returned Thad.

"That is what everybody thinks; but, it ain't so. Madame Vleric is too smart for that. She says that anybody that can't do a job without leaving tool-marks had better go into the butchering business."

"But you haven't told me how she accomplishes her purpose."

"So I haven't," as if suddenly recollecting himself. "Well, she takes the hair of a tiger, cuts it into small bits and mixes a little of it in all the food the patient eats. That kills them in about two months, and the doctors never can tell what is the matter with the patient."

"Where does she get the tiger hair?"

"Oh, she has lots of it. She brought it from Algiers. There is where she learned this business. It's a regular business there, she says. If one person don't like another and don't want to go to the trouble of killing him himself, he goes to one of these people and pays them so much."

"Lesser," mused the detective. "That is what the L stands for, is it?"

"Yes, sir."

"How long has Madame Vleric been in this country?" asked Thad.

"Only a year."

"Where did she come from here?"

"France—Paris. She carried on the business there until the police got too close upon her track, and then she came here."

"Was Burt Manion with her on the other side?"

"Yes, sir; but Mrs. Coburn joined her here. I was with Burt in England a long time before I saw the madame. I first saw her in Paris."

"Why did you not notify the police of what was going on?"

"Because, sir, I wasn't ready to die until a few days ago."

"Oh, I see."

"You see, I knew that the moment I told on them they would kill me; and it is only because I want to die that I tell you now, sir."

The detective was silent for some time.

Finally he said:

"Do you think it would be possible to get any of the tiger's hair?"

"No, sir. The madame keeps it locked up," replied the lad.

"You know where it is, don't you?"

"Yes, sir; in an iron box."

"Couldn't you manage to steal the box out, don't you think?"

"No, sir; there's somebody watching all the time. Nobody could get the box and get out alive."

"Well, I think I can," remarked Thad, more to himself than to the boy.

"Perhaps so, sir. But you'd better get your life insured before you try it," warned Chalky, in dead earnest.

"Well, we'll see, my boy. But now, tell me how did you know me when you saw me come out of the flat this afternoon?"

"By shadowing you, sir. You remember you followed a big man and a little woman from Twenty-third street and Broadway down to Thirteenth street?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was on your heels all the time. Then you followed the woman on down to Clinton Place, and I shadowed you. There you waited until the woman, with two others, came out, and then followed them to the house on Fifth avenue. I was on your track all the time. There you waited again a long time, until the young gentleman brought the young ladies home from the theater, and then you followed him to the hotel, and there was where I first heard your name. By that time I had learned your walk so well that I could tell you anywhere."

"How came you to shadow me in the first place?"

"That was one of my duties," admitted Chalky, with a business air. "When Annie was out to meet people on business I had to keep a lookout that nobody followed her. If I discovered anybody following her I had to find out his name and business—I would have got killed on the spot if I'd 'a' come home without it."

"So you are the one that gave them all the points in regard to me, are you?"

"Yes, sir."

"What do you think I ought to do with you for it?" asked Thad, with a severe countenance.

"Kill me."

"Why do you want me to kill you?"

"Because if you don't do it, sir, Burt will; and I believe you will do it more gentle than him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you would probably shoot me and be done with it, while he would beat me to death, that's all."

"I see. Well, my lad, I shall neither kill you or allow Burt to do it. Of course you won't shadow me any more."

"Yes, I will, if you or Burt don't kill me," said Chalky, in a matter-of-fact tone, that showed how little he regarded the matter, aside from a business transaction.

Then an idea struck the detective.

Perhaps this boy, raised as he had been among criminals, saw no wrong in this kind of life.

The boy's conversation up to that time certainly indicated that.

He would investigate.

"Don't you know that you were doing very wrong, Chalky," he said, "to aid these people in this horrid work, and also trying to prevent an officer from doing his duty?"

"Yes, sir, if you're caught," replied the boy, coolly.

"But if you are not caught?"

"Then it's all right."

"You see no wrong in it?"

"No, sir. Every one has to live some way, and one way's good as another, so you don't get caught. And as for tripping the cops, there can't be no harm in that."

"My boy, you have a strange idea of morality. I shall have to take you under my charge for a while, and see if I cannot instill some different notions in your head."

The boy was silent for a while, and his habitual expression of melancholy grew stronger than usual in his face.

After a while he said:

"I s'pose you're going to try to catch the madame and Burt and them, are you, sir?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I do not know exactly. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing, only I thought I might help you to catch them."

"How?"

"Why, when they are all asleep I'll chloroform them, and then let you in at the door and you can take them."

"That is not necessary, my boy," said Thad. "As soon as I get enough evidence of their guilt, I'll get in quick enough. But now we had better go to bed. I will give you a nice little bunk in the back room there."

"Oh, I can't stay all night, sir," cried Chalky, springing up suddenly and grabbing his hat.

"Why not?"

"Oh, sir, I must be there in the morning. They have lots for me to do."

"In that case they will have to get somebody else, my boy. You will stay here."

"No, I won't," cried the boy, his chalky face assuming the expression of malignancy that Thad had noticed on first seeing him.

"Yes, you will, my boy. I can't afford to let you go now."

"Yes, you will; I must go, I will go," he cried, frantically, at the same time trying his utmost to dodge past the detective and reach the door.

The detective headed him off with little effort, and hoped that he would calm down before long, but on the contrary he appeared to get more violent every minute, and Thad lost his patience at last.

Finally he got tired of this nonsense, and made a grab for the boy to settle him down.

The boy evaded his grasp, so quick and agile was he, and before the detective was aware of his intentions the boy whipped out a pistol and fired!

Fortunately the boy missed his aim, but still the ball went sufficiently near Thad's cheek for him to feel the concussion.

Thad was aware now for the first time that he had a dangerous customer, although but a boy of fifteen, to deal with.

Moreover, he knew that either sentiment or delay now would be foolish and out of place.

The boy must be brought into subjection and that at once.

The boy had ceased dodging about trying to escape, and had crouched himself in a corner like a tiger at bay; his lips were compressed, his chalky complexion had assumed a greenish-yellow tinge and his black eyes snapped with all the malignant venom of a serpent.

Meanwhile he held the revolver cocked ready for action.

Thad did not for a moment lose his self-possession, and although he had no fear, he realized that tact was a great deal better than foolhardy bravery in an emergency like this.

For a full minute the two stood eying each other, and it would have been difficult to tell which possessed the greatest amount of bravery and coolness.

Finally Thad saw his opportunity.

Quicker than the spring of a hyena he sprung toward the boy and grasped his wrists.

The boy struggled heroically; but it was of no avail. The detective's hands were like a pair of steel vises about his wrists.

Thad wrenched the pistol away from the boy, and then, while he held both wrists with one hand, searched him for other weapons.

His search was rewarded by finding another pistol and two knives. These the detective appropriated, and then released the boy.

"Now," said Thad, "do you think you can behave yourself, or shall I put you in irons?"

"Kill me!" cried the boy.

"No, I have no desire to kill you, my boy," replied Thad, kindly. "But there are two things you may as well know now: one is, that you cannot leave this place, and the other that you must behave yourself, or I will put you in irons."

The boy made no reply, and Thad led him into a small room which he had arranged for such cases, being lined with sheet-iron, and secured by an extra strong door. There was a cot in the room, and everything to make one fairly comfortable.

Into this room Thad pushed the boy and shut the door.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNEXPECTED TURN OF AFFAIRS.

THE forenoon was pretty well advanced when the detective woke next morning.

Perhaps he would not have awoken then, only for the fact that somebody was rapping vigorously at the door.

Thad wondered who it could be, and after revolving the question in his mind for a few moments, during which the rapping was repeated several times, he jumped out of bed, slipped on his dressing-gown and opened the door.

To his utter surprise he found the little governess, Florence Seymour, standing there.

Her naturally red face was more melancholy than usual, and her eyes showed signs of weeping.

For a moment the detective was unable to place her, so differently did she look in her street dress and large, feather-trimmed hat.

After a moment's study of her face, however, he recalled her, and said:

"Why, Miss Seymour, what brings you here?"

"I want to see Mr. Burr, if he is in," was her answer.

For an instant the answer caused him a little surprise, but he soon recalled the fact that she had never seen him in his natural guise, and of course did not recognize him.

"Come in," he said, opening the door. "Mr. Burr will see you in a few minutes."

Without another word she stepped inside, and the detective conducted her into his parlor, and then excused himself until he could dress and make his toilet.

A few minutes later he re-entered the parlor, and advancing toward the little governess, extended his hand with the remark:

"Mr. Burr will now see you."

The little lady looked about in wonderment, and finally said:

"Will he come in here, or shall I go to him, sir?"

"He stands before you now, Miss Seymour," replied the detective.

She stared at him incredulously.

"What, you aren't Mr. Burr?"

"I was aware that you were in disguise when you called at the house last evening," she said. "You were impersonating another gentleman, I believe. But I thought I should be able to recognize your voice."

"The face is the least difficult part we have to disguise in our business, miss," the detective answered, using Nevin's voice and accent as he spoke. Then returning to his natural voice, he continued: "The voice is another matter. Any burglar can make up his face in such a way as to deceive his best friends; but to converse for a whole evening in the voice of another is art."

"I should think so," she said. "But I haven't told you what I came for. My letter to you and your reply in person have been the means of getting me into the very difficulty I desired to avoid."

"I am sorry for that, Miss Seymour. What has been the result?"

"They have dismissed me from their service?"

"Indeed! That is too bad," said Thad in his gentlest and most sympathetic voice.

"Yes; and I wouldn't care if I was the only one to suffer," she said, wiping her eyes.

"I remember you told me that your invalid mother and some younger brothers and sisters depended upon your efforts," said Thad, kindly. "But never mind. We shall soon have another place for you, and in the mean time you shall want for nothing."

"Oh, sir, that is not the worst part of it," she sobbed. "That is bad enough, Heaven knows; but that poor lady! Now that I am no longer there, she hasn't a friend in the house, and they will soon kill her."

"I hope not. In fact, I expect to be able to do something for her within twenty-four hours, or sooner. Besides, as they were all leagued against you and her, you could do her no good by your presence, could you?"

"Indeed, I could and did, sir. Last night after you left I slipped into the sick-chamber and, finding the nurse asleep, as she usually is about midnight, I took away the gruel they are in the habit of giving the sick lady, and replaced it with some which I had prepared myself. Not suspecting anything, the nurse fed the gruel which I had made to the patient during the night, and this morning she was greatly improved in health. They must have noticed the change, for when Madame Vleric called this morning there was a great commotion; and whether it was due to that or the fact that you called and conversed with me I do not know; but before ten o'clock I was unceremoniously put out of the house."

"This is unfortunate," said Thad, half-musing, "and, yet it may prove a blessing. There is this about it: It proves our theory of the slow poisoning, and places you in a position to testify against these wicked people."

"Yes, but I fear they will be so incensed that they will hurry the poor lady off before we can do anything for her."

"We must act at once," said Thad. "There is evidently no time to lose. I wish you had thought to secure some of the poisoned gruel, and I would have had it analyzed; and if there were any traces of poison discovered in it, I could procure a warrant for the arrest of the whole crowd and thereby rescue the poor victim."

"Could you?" she cried, brightening up.

"Certainly."

"Good!" she cried, gleefully. "You can proceed at once. See here," she said, pulling a small jar from under her cloak. "Here it is!"

The detective was delighted.

If the jar had contained gold-dust instead of poisoned gruel, he could not have been more in raptures.

"You are a jewel!" he cried, in ecstasy. "This simplifies our work wonderfully. I will take this to a chemist at once, and if there is anything wrong with it, I will have his certificate to that effect before noon, and have that crowd of villains in jail before night!"

"And—and rescue the poor sick lady, eh?" cried Florence, enthusiastically.

"Yes, and rescue the sick lady," said Thad, rising to go. "Will you remain here, Miss Seymour, or go with me?"

"Oh, I must go home. I haven't seen my mother for over a week, and I want to take this opportunity of seeing her."

"Very well, then; and you can call this evening or in the morning for news, as you will be anxious to know what progress I am making."

"This evening, by all means," said Florence. "I could not sleep until I knew the result of your day's work."

As she uttered these words the detective could not help but notice how small and child-like the little lady was, more than he had ever noticed it before. One thing that particularly called his attention to it, was the fact that as she sat on the sofa her little feet did not touch the floor.

"Oh, there is one thing more that I want to speak to you about, Mr. Burr," she said, suddenly springing up in her childish way. "They know all your plans up at the house."

"All my plans?"

"Yes, sir; they were discussing them in the servants' hall when I left; and when a matter

reaches the servants it must be pretty well known in the parlor."

"Not necessarily," said Thad. "The servants often know more about a home's scandal than the master. But that is of no consequence. What plans do you refer to? I have no definite plans, except the one I spoke to you about, disguising myself as a nurse and passing the night in the sick-chamber. Is that the one you mean?"

"No, sir, strange to say, they haven't heard of that apparently. At least they have said nothing about it. The one they were talking about particularly was your contemplated visit to Madame Vleric's flat for the purpose of obtaining possession of an iron box containing her poison."

If anybody had struck the detective over the head with a club he would not have been much more stunned than he was at this revelation.

He had never thought of this expedition until midnight the night before; in fact, not until then did he know the existence of the iron box of tiger's hair, and then he had mentioned the contemplated expedition to but one person, Chalky Nig, who, being securely locked in the little iron-bound cage, could not have communicated the secret.

The matter was of little consequence anyway, as it was more than probable that he would never attempt the trip; but he was curious, nay, anxious, to know how they came in possession of the information, and that in so short a time.

"This is strange," he said aloud at last. "How, in the name of wonder, do you imagine they got hold of that story, Miss Seymour? It is of no importance, as I shall probably never undertake the expedition, or that I will have any occasion to. But it puzzles me to know how they could have heard that I ever contemplated such a thing, as I never mentioned it to a living soul except the mulatto boy they call Chalky Nig."

"Well, it was he that brought the information to the house," said Florence.

"Impossible!" exclaimed Thad.

"Why impossible?"

"Because I have him locked in a back room, and he has been there ever since, or nearly ever since I mentioned the matter to him."

"It is very strange," said Florence. "He certainly was up at the house this morning a few minutes after Madame Vleric arrived."

"Are you sure?" asked the detective incredulously.

"Never was surer of anything in my life," said the little lady.

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you know the boy?"

"Certainly; I have seen him every day since Madame Vleric has been at the house."

"We shall soon see," said Thad, starting for the back room.

Florence hopped down from the sofa and followed him.

A moment later Thad unlocked and threw open the door.

The cell was empty, the boy was gone!

For a moment the detective was staggered.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

But in another moment he coolly walked in and began silently investigating the cell.

For a long time he could see no place where any one could have escaped.

The floor was perfect, the walls were just as they had always been since the sheet-iron was nailed over it.

Where, then, could the boy have made his escape?

Finally, as his eye wandered about the ceiling, he noticed a flue-hole of extremely large dimensions, through which a boy of the mulatto's size might possibly creep, if he could get up to it; but that was what puzzled Thad. How had he managed to get up to the flue?"

This would probably have remained a mystery to the end of time, had not the detective noticed that all the bedding was off the cot, and on the floor at the foot.

There must be a reason for this.

Taking hold of the cot at the head he tipped it up on end.

That solved the mystery.

The top of the cot when so tipped on end was directly under the flue, and the bedding would have slid into its present position.

Therefore, it was clear that the boy had stood the cot on end, and used it for a ladder by clinging to the wire mattress, and then when he was securely in the flue kicked it down again.

"Smart boy that," mused Thad aloud.

Up to that time not a word had passed between him and the little governess, but she had watched his movements closely and read his perplexity and final triumph in his face.

"Yes," said Florence, answering the latest expression of his face rather than his words, "that is undoubtedly the way he got out; and that accounts for his appearance when he came to the house. He was covered with soot."

"But who would have thought of escaping in that manner, besides that boy?" said Thad.

"Nobody," rejoined Florence. "But I have always noticed that this boy is very cunning."

"He is cunning. These half breeds usually

are cunning. He certainly outwitted me this time; but if I get him into my clutches again, I guarantee he won't get away so easily."

The detective then led the way into the front room again.

"Well, there is no use of wasting any more time over this matter," he said. "I will go to my chemist, and you, Miss Seymour, may go home for the present."

"Very well, sir," said Florence.

"You will be here this evening, of course?"

"Yes, sir."

"Don't make it later than six o'clock, please, as I have an appointment at seven or half-past."

"All right, sir, I will be here at six or before," said Florence.

"By the way, do you need any money, Miss Seymour?" asked Thad, stopping at the door.

"No, sir, not at present. I have sufficient for my present needs."

"Very well," he said, kindly. "If you need any at any time, do not hesitate to ask me for it. You remember I promised you that."

"Thank you, sir, I shall avail myself of your kind offer, if it becomes necessary."

They then left the studio, Florence going home and the detective to his analytical chemist's.

The chemist to whom Thad went was a Russian, but from his accent any one would have mistaken him for a Frenchman.

His name was Dedorov, and he was the most expert chemist in New York, and his knowledge of poisons was unsurpassed.

Thad had availed himself of this chemist's expert knowledge many times before, and had implicit faith in him.

It was with a good deal of satisfaction, therefore, that he placed the little jar of poisoned gruel before him.

"Vell, Mistaire Burr, v'at have we now? more of ze poisoned food upon vich your people of ze shady reputation have been feeding zair victims?"

"Yes, doctor," said Thad, "one more installment of infamy. See what you can find in that pot of porridge."

"We shall soon see, ma friend," said the little chemist, cocking his head on one side like a bird; and immediately went to work.

CHAPTER IX.

AN APPOINTMENT.

As the little chemist proceeded with his analysis Thad looked at his watch and saw that it was nearly one o'clock.

Remembering the appointment he had to meet Annie Montroi in Madison Square, he knew that he would have no time to wait for the completion of the analysis if he wished to meet the woman.

Therefore he told the chemist that he would call for his report later in the day, and hurried away to his apartments.

Once there, he made himself up as a business man, just as he was when he called at Madame Vleric's flat on the previous day.

By the time this was done, he had only time to snatch something to eat and reach the Square a few minutes before three.

Here he sat down upon one of the benches near the fountain, and pretended to consult the evening paper.

The detective was scarcely settled in his seat, when Chalky Nig came strolling leisurely by, with a look of innocent unconcern.

Thad's fingers itched to get hold of the little rascal, but under the circumstances he knew that it would not do to betray his own identity, and was compelled to let him go.

The boy strolled on, apparently unconscious of the detective's existence, walked half-way round the circular path, and returned in the same dreamy manner, strolled on past the detective for some distance, and again returned.

He had scarcely got past Thad the third time, when the latter's attention was attracted by a veiled woman who was also walking in an extremely leisurely manner.

She, too, passed the detective, but stopped and sat down upon the very next seat, not more than a yard away.

Thad watched her movements without appearing to, and saw her take something from her pocketbook.

A moment later he saw her place the article against the seat upon which she sat and draw a brush across it.

As soon as this was done she arose and strolled ahead.

Thad also arose, and, after glancing at the seat lately occupied by the woman, and seeing there the mythical L inclosed in a circle, he quickened his pace, and was soon alongside of the veiled woman.

There being no one within earshot, Thad spoke to her in a low tone.

"Good-afternoon," he said. "I noticed your trade-mark on the seat."

She turned, raised her veil high enough for him to see her mouth, and smiled.

"Yes?" she said, in a low but rather musical voice. "Out walking for your health, I presume."

"Oh, yes; although it may not be so healthy for some people I could name."

Whatever the detective meant by this expres-

sion. Annie Montroi (for it was she) understood it to be an allusion to her trade, and laughed merrily.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said. "Some people are all the better for having had business with us."

"Those that remain, possibly; but how about the others?"

"Those are the ones I refer to," she laughed. "When a gentleman gets very tired of a tiresome wife, it is much more comfortable for her as well as him to be laid away where she will hear no more of his complaints, and he can amuse himself by planting flowers upon her."

"You are not troubled with seriousness in connection with your profession," said Thad, forcing a laugh at her grim humor, although he could have cursed her with better grace.

"Oh, no; why should I be? It's a matter of business as well as anything else. An undertaker puts on mourning out of respect for his customers, but as soon as he is out of hearing of the mourners, he will crack a joke with the best of us. A corpse has no more terrors for him than a board has to a carpenter; they both represent dollars and cents to the manipulators. Shall we sit down where we can talk business?"

"If you like, ma'am," said Thad. "Although it is a trifling public here to talk upon such matters, don't you think so?"

"Not at all," said she, sinking upon a seat. "There is no place so safe for discussing secrets as a park or crowded thoroughfare. The walls of the securest rooms have ears, but the wild winds of Heaven hear nothing, or, like a gibbering idiot, repeat what they hear and retain nothing."

"You are quite a philosopher, madame," said Thad. He came very near saying Miss Montroi, but checked himself in time.

"Oh, yes," she laughed. "One must be philosopher, poet or artist as the occasion requires. I'm something of an artist in black and white. Let me see, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Jourdan," said Thad.

"Mr. Jourdan, what did you say this case of yours is? Wife with a temper, a cough and a fat policy on her dear life; a beloved mother with a cast-iron constitution and a cool million, or only a rich distant relative who is too near in the Pegotty sense?"

"Neither—that is, exactly as you describe them. It is a wife; but she has no cough. On the contrary, she has a constitution of Bessemer steel. She can cut a hole in the ice and go in swimming in January, and walk home barefoot without catching cold. She can eat deviled crabs on an empty stomach, and then practice on the turning-pole, without a qualm. Tough? Whew! Rubber boot-heels are nowhere. Why, ma'am, she lived on poison mushrooms for six months once before she discovered the difference. Meanwhile, she had gained fifteen pounds in weight."

"She may be all that," said Annie, laughing; "but she could not stand out against our treatment. Instead of gaining fifteen pounds in six months, she will lose fifty in two weeks, and give up the ghost."

"Your method must be something powerful, ma'am."

"Well, yes, rather."

The detective was silent a few minutes under the pretense of thinking the matter over; but as a matter of fact trying to remember where he had heard that voice.

He was sure that he had heard, both the voice and the mode of expression somewhere, but for the life of him he could not recollect.

Finally he said:

"Your terms are—"

"Five thousand dollars," she interrupted. "One thousand before the contract is signed, one thousand as soon as we undertake the job, and the remainder when the work is completed."

"Isn't that a little steep?"

"That is for you to consider. Those are our terms, and you are not compelled to accept them."

"I see. You are independent."

"We can afford to be," she said, suddenly growing as cold and practical as she had been witty and careless before. "Do you want the work done or not, sir?"

"Oh, certainly, I want it done," said he; "but you must give me a moment to consider."

"Very well, take ten minutes. That is all I can spare."

Again Thad was silent.

Where had he heard that voice?

Now that he gave it more careful thought he saw that it was slightly disguised, but still there were notes and inflections in it which were as familiar to him as his mother's voice.

"Well," he said at last, "I accept your terms. When can you commence?"

"In about a week," she replied.

"You have other cases on hand, I suppose."

"Certainly."

"Tell me, is there not some danger connected with this undertaking?"

"Danger?"

"Yes, from the authorities."

"For us, a little. For you, none."

"But suppose somebody should suspect that

something was wrong, and have a *post-mortem* examination held—"

"They find nothing."

"No trace of poison?"

"How could they, when no poison is used?"

"Oh! What do you use?"

"That is *our* business."

"To be sure; and you aren't giving away the secret to everybody."

"Hardly."

"But suppose a skillful detective should be called in, couldn't he make it uncomfortable for all of us?"

"Nonsense!" she cried, impatiently. "We laugh at detectives. There is one fooling round us now; but he will never accomplish anything."

"Indeed!" cried Thad, in well-simulated astonishment. "Do you know him to be a detective?"

"Certainly."

"What is his name?"

"Burr, I think."

"Ah! I think I have heard of him. Did you ever speak with him?"

"Yes; once. But this has nothing to do with our affairs. If you want us to consider your case, you must give me a thousand dollars down."

"When?"

"At once, now."

"Really, madame, this takes me unprepared. I did not think of having to pay so much money down. Won't to-morrow do?"

"No; we do not grant two interviews for one contract. If you are not prepared to do it today, the matter must end here."

"I'll tell you what I can do: I can give you a check."

"That will not do. I must have the cash."

Thad was thoughtful a moment.

"I can get the money by going down-town," he said, finally, "and will bring it to you at any place you may suggest."

"Well," she said, after a moment's reflection, "do that. Bring it to 107½ Clinton Place. I will not be there myself, but Madame Vleric will, and she will give you a receipt."

"Very well," said the detective, rising. "I will be there inside of an hour."

"Stay," said the woman, "I will give you a letter of introduction to the madame so that you will have no trouble in getting in. What is your name?" she asked, taking out a pencil in a small writing-ad.

"J. P. Jourdan," said Thad.

The woman scribbled away for a few minutes, and finally handed him the following:

"MADAME VLERIC:—

"This will introduce Mr. J. P. Jourdan, a customer in L, who wishes to pay you the first installment, one thousand (\$1,000) dollars.

"Le votre de L, ANNIE."

As soon as this was done the woman hurried away, and although Thad pretended to also hurry away, he lingered in sight long enough to see her get into a Fifth avenue stage, going up-town.

When he saw that she was really gone, he was in no hurry to go, but turned his attention to the boy, Chalky Nig, who had slipped from his memory during the exciting interview with the woman. But when he came to look for that sly young villain, he was nowhere to be seen.

Being satisfied, though, that the boy would follow him when he started, and remembering what he had said about recognizing him (the detective) by his walk, Thad started off down the street on foot, and taking care to disguise his walk as much as possible.

Sure enough, the detective had got but a few blocks when the mulatto turned up from some mysterious place, and was seen dogging his footsteps.

Thad affected not to notice him, of course, but made all sorts of circuitous turns, first over to Broadway, then back to Fifth avenue, and again over to Sixth avenue. But the chalky face was always in sight.

When the detective arrived at Eighth street (Clinton Place) the boy was but half a block behind him, and apparently as unconscious of his existence as a man in another state.

As soon as Thad reached the building in which Madame Vleric's flat was located, he stopped to wait for Chalky.

But the boy was too shrewd. He also stopped, and appeared to be greatly interested in something in a show-window.

Seeing that he would not approach as long as he stood there, the detective stepped into the foyer of the tenement and rung Madame Vleric's bell.

There was no response. The door did not open, and he rung again.

This time while he waited he took out the note given to him by Annie Montroi; and glanced over it.

He saw, what he had failed to notice the first time he read the note, that the mystic sign of L, inclosed in a circle was stamped on one end of the sheet.

This caused him to turn the note around when he saw, written in very small letters:

"Ring three times—knock twice."

The latter, of course referred to the door upstairs.

Thad saw his way clear now, and rung the bell three times, when the door was instantly opened.

He went up-stairs without delay, and when he arrived at Madame Vleric's door, knocked at it twice.

After a very short pause the door opened and a tall, middle-aged woman stood before him.

Without a word the detective presented his note of introduction, and after reading it over carefully the woman eyed Thad sharply for a moment, and said:

"Are you Mistaire Jourdan?"

"Yes, madame," replied Thad.

"And you are ready to pay me ze—ze monie?"

"I am, madame, as soon as I get a receipt," he said firmly.

"Vaire well, saire; eef you will wait zare I will give you ze—ze receipt."

Floored again," thought Thad.

But he was determined to get inside if strategy would do it.

"No, no, madame," he protested, taking out a roll of bills so she could see them, "I object to doing business in the hall. It is too risky."

"Oh, saire, zere eez no danger. Nobody will know what ze money eez for," she pleaded.

"That may be, and you may be willing to risk it; but I will pay no money unless I know that I am secure from curious eyes."

The old woman seemed to reflect for a moment, and finally said, opening the door:

"Vaire well, come inside. You are vaire big coward, saire. *Mon dieu!* I do business wiz plenty people in ze hall."

Without another word the detective stepped in.

"At last!" thought he.

CHAPTER X.

MORE THAN SHE BARGAINED FOR.

THE old woman led the detective through a hall and into a large sitting-room or parlor.

The room was elegantly furnished, and the floor covered with expensive Turkish rugs.

Motioning Thad to a seat the old woman went into a smaller room adjoining which appeared to be fitted up as an office and sat down at a desk and began to write.

In the mean time the detective took the opportunity to look about him.

From where he sat he could see several rooms leading one into the other, and all luxuriously furnished.

Away in the distance he could see a room which was evidently a library, and he could see what appeared to be row upon row of expensive and no doubt valuable books.

Then he contemplated the old woman as she sat bent over her writing.

He could not avoid being struck with her appearance.

There was something noble and majestic in her bearing, and she had evidently been a woman of remarkable beauty in her youth.

She was tall and straight, very dark and still possessed a good complexion. Her eyes were large, black as night and full of fire. Her features were regular, but slightly wrinkled, although she was probably sixty; her mouth firm and rather pretty, and her teeth as white and even as those of a girl of eighteen. Her hair was as white as snow, but wavy and soft, and was a real ornament.

This woman and her surroundings were in perfect harmony, and indicated refinement and good taste.

But how, thought the detective, could they be harmonized with the horrible business in which she was engaged?

He was deeply impressed, but did not forget what he had come there for.

All the glitter of wealth could not dazzle him or make him forget his duty.

The old woman made a move indicative of having finished her writing. In fact Thad saw her pick up a blotter preparatory to blotting the sheet.

He arose quickly, and with so little sound that nobody would have known that a soul was stirring unless they had seen him, stepped into the room and to the side of the old woman.

He placed his left hand in which he held a roll of bills, on the desk. His right hand rested upon the back of her chair, and she could not see what it contained.

His sudden appearance startled her, and she looked upon him with an expression of mingled surprise and indignation.

Evidently he had intruded upon sacred ground.

"Why have ze monsieur not keep hees seat?" she demanded indignantly, her eyes flashing fire.

"Because, madame, I desire to see whether you were making out my receipt correctly, and—"

"Zat I make out ze receipt correctly?" she cried angrily. "Does ze monsieur imagine zat I cannot do my bee兹ness?"

"Besides that," continued Thad, as though he had not been interrupted; "besides that, I wish you to do some other writing for me."

She had dropped her eyes upon the receipt before he said this; but as soon as he said it she looked up in astonishment.

"What?" she almost screeched.

"Never mind," he said coolly, bringing his right hand, in which he held a revolver, round in front of her face. "Not a sound, or I will blow your brains out!"

The old woman turned ghastly, less from fear than rage, and the detective saw her fingers stealing nervously toward her bosom.

"No you don't," he said, coolly and firmly.

"Put down that hand!"

"What you want?" she said doggedly.

"Take your pen and write as I dictate," he said, in a low voice, but with a force behind it that she could see brooked no refusal.

Still she was too proud and stubborn to yield without protest.

"I will not!" she said.

"Take your choice," he said, as coolly and firmly as before. "If you do not do as I request within five minutes I will send a bullet through your brain. Make up your mind."

"I won't!" she snapped.

"Just as you say."

There was a cool deliberation in his words that seemed to strike terror even into this depraved woman, used as she was to crime and danger. But it is said that nobody dreads death so much as a professional executioner.

He could see that she shuddered at his last words, and she attempted to turn her head as if to look behind her.

At the same time Thad heard heavy footsteps, as of those of a man, in a distant room.

He realized the peril of his position and the necessity for haste.

"Time is up," he said. "Not another second!"

This was said in a still colder voice and seemed to thrill the woman.

She instantly grasped the pen.

"What would ze monsieur have me write?" she asked in a cowed, yet dogged voice.

Without further parley Thad dictated and she wrote the following:

"MRS. SARAH COBURN:—

"This will introduce to you Mrs. Mary Ann Coogan, an honest, worthy person, who will assume the duty of nurse and act as your assistant for this evening. Or, if you like, you may rest to-night and let Annie work in conjunction with this woman."

"MDME. M. VLERIC."

"Now are you satisfy?" snapped the madame when she had finished the writing.

"All but one thing," replied Thad.

"What eez zat?"

"Put your little trade-mark up in the corner."

"What you call trade-mark?"

"Your mysterious sign, L in red ink," explained the detective.

"But I will not put zat on," she said firmly.

"Yes, you will, and be quick about it, too!" he said, pushing the revolver a little closer to the woman's face.

She made no further resistance, but picked up a stamp, dabbed it on a pad of red ink and impressed it upon the sheet.

"Thank you," said Thad. "That will do very nicely. Now I will bid you good-afternoon."

"What, you not give me ze money?" she cried, in astonishment, as she saw him pocket the roll of bills.

"Not this time, madame."

She ground her teeth with rage.

"You are a rascal—a—a detective, I think! I will—"

Here she attempted to rise, and Thad pushed her down into her seat again.

"What you will do wiz zat ordair?" she said.

"Never mind; I have use for that," he said, backing out of the room, and still keeping her covered with his revolver.

As soon as he was without the door he closed and locked it on the outside.

The moment he did so the woman set up a terrific scream.

Almost at the same instant the hall door flew open and in burst Chalky Nig.

The mulatto gave a hasty glance at the detective, and then darted back toward the library, shouting:

"Burt! Burt! A detective in the house!"

The next instant Thad saw the repulsive-faced outlaw dashing along the hall toward him, a revolver in each hand.

Thad knew what the consequences would be if the fellow reached him.

The detective knew himself to be a good shot; but the fellow was probably equally as good, and moreover was a desperate character, fearless and unscrupulous.

The only thing to be done was to prevent him from reaching the sitting-room.

This must be done instantly.

Not a second could be lost.

Springing with the swiftness of a tiger, Thad reached the intervening door.

A second more and it was shut and locked.

The baffled villain could be heard swearing like a fiend, and abusing the boy for not notifying him sooner.

And the boy was pleading for mercy on the ground that he did not discover that Thad was a detective until he found something that the latter had lost in the hall.

Thad wondered what it was that he had lost, but had no time to investigate then, for the old woman was banging at the door with a good chance of breaking it open, at his back, and Burt had begun to hammer at the door in front of him.

Burt did not utter a word to the detective, and the latter only uttered one sentence to him:

"You had better not knock that door down, if you know when you are well off."

That did not appear to deter the fellow; but after pounding upon the door for some time, he seemed to get tired, and ceased of his own accord.

All was silent for a while, except the old woman's pounding, which also grew fainter after a time and Thad was wondering what was going on.

He knew that Burt was not the man to give in so easily: and felt certain that this silence boded no good.

Still, the detective could not see that he could do anything but wait and be on the defensive.

True, he could have escaped, as the hall door was only a little ways off from him; but he did not want to do that, for it would leave these people unguarded and they would soon get together, when Burt would find out that the old woman had given him the letter of introduction to Sarah Coburn, and they would at once communicate with that person.

The detective listened for any suspicious noises, but could hear nothing.

He looked about the room for any place of entrance besides the private hall and the door leading to the library, which he had locked, and there appeared to be none.

He had about made up his mind that the fellow had given up the fight, when he heard a slight, almost imperceptible rustle behind him.

He turned, and barely had time to catch a glimpse of Chalky Nig, when that young rascal blazed away at him with a revolver.

The little fellow's aim had been pretty good, for the ball struck the detective in the breast.

But, fortunately, it struck a large pocketbook he carried in his inside pocket and glanced off.

The boy evidently did not intend to stop at one shot, for he raised the pistol a second time.

But Thad was too quick for him.

Springing at the boy, the detective dealt him a blow with his fist that laid him senseless upon the floor.

But the little chap was game to the last, for even after Thad struck him he pulled the trigger, and as he reeled to the floor sent a bullet into the ceiling.

This had all occupied but a fraction of a minute; but scarcely had the boy fallen when Burt put in an appearance as mysteriously as the boy had done.

Thad then saw how they had managed it.

Burt stepped out from an upright piano, and the boy had probably done the same thing. How they had got there could only be conjectured, but doubtless through some secret passage connecting the sitting-room with the rear apartments.

Burt appeared to be a little surprised at the situation on his arrival.

Doubtless, knowing the boy's skillful marksmanship, he was astonished not to see Thad stretched upon the floor.

Giving a nasty glance at the prostrate form of Chalky Nig, the villain put on the most fiendish expression Thad had ever seen, and deliberately raised his pistol to the detective's head.

Thad was too quick for him, though, and before he had time to pull the trigger, dealt him a blow between the eyes with his own revolver, that sent him reeling to the floor.

But the fellow was only slightly stunned, and scarcely struck the floor when he fired.

His aim was still more accurate than Chalky's had been, for the bullet struck the detective in the head.

Fortunately Thad's head was turned in such a way that, although the ball struck him in the forehead, it struck it at an angle and glanced off.

Still, the concussion was so great that Thad was badly stunned, and fell to the floor.

The villain, who had by this time recovered, was on top of him instantly, and clutching him by the throat with his left hand, raised a knife in the other to deal him a death-blow.

The fellow nerved his arm, and evidently intended to make sure work of it.

Thad, half-unconscious as he was, could hear him grind his teeth like some carnivorous animal.

But the pain inflicted by the choking had the effect of bringing Thad to his senses.

He opened his eyes and saw the gleaming blade raised over him.

Every particle of his wits instantly returned to him, and with them his gigantic strength.

It was not a second too soon.

Another second the blade would have been buried in his breast.

But it was not to be.

Throwing up his powerful left hand, he struck Burt's right wrist just at the moment when the

knife was descending, and the dagger went spinning into the air.

Almost at the same instant the detective's right arm shot up like a catapult, striking the blade in the jaw.

The pain from the blow was so great that the fellow relaxed his grip on Thad's throat, and the next instant the detective had him by the throat.

A fearful struggle followed.

The men were about evenly matched, but Burt had the advantage of being on top.

Burt was making desperate efforts to strike Thad in the face, and to prevent this, and at the same time retain his hold upon the scoundrel's throat, kept him pretty busy.

Finally, however, the vise-like grip on the fellow's throat began to tell, and gradually Thad could see his strength failing.

At last the brute's strength forsook him under the terrible choking, and he rolled off on the floor.

Thad immediately arose and placed handcuffs on him, which he also did to the boy.

He then piled all the furniture he could lift against the door of the office, where the old woman was locked in.

Next he made a search of the premises for the iron box; but as he could not find it, he concluded it must be in the office where the madame was; so he left the flat.

CHAPTER XI.

IT WAS TIGER'S HAIR.

AS soon as Thad left the flat of Madame Vleric he hurried away to his apartments, where he hastily removed his disguise and resumed his natural character again.

When this was done he hastened off to the office of the analytical chemist, Dudorov.

The little chemist had completed his analysis, and was sitting in a big arm-chair that swallowed him to the ears.

Thad could see that something bad gone wrong with the little Russian as soon as he went in.

He sat with his head resting upon one hand and gazing at a figure in the carpet, while his face was a picture of despair.

"What's wrong, old fellow?" said Thad, in his hearty, kindly way.

The little chemist merely shook his head.

"Haven't been having a racket with the wife again, I hope."

Again he shook his head.

Dudorov, who was no larger than an ordinary boy of fifteen, had a German wife that would weigh close to two hundred, and she ruled the roost.

This was the cause of a good deal of despair on the little chemist's part; although ordinarily he was cheerful to the extent of playfulness.

The detective being acquainted with these facts, naturally attributed his present depression to them.

But he was mistaken, as a little further inquiry proved.

"Well, what did you make of the gruel?" asked Thad.

The chemist again shook his head in silence.

"Did you find any poison or other deleterious matter in it, old fellow?"

"Nossing," groaned the chemist.

"What?" exclaimed the detective, in great surprise.

"Zat eez right. Nossing."

"Do you mean to say that the gruel is wholesome and harmless?"

"Et eez harmless; but for ze wholesomeness I cannot say."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean zat all I can find in ze compound eez an indication of filthy cooking."

"Still I do not catch your meaning, doctor," said Thad.

"I will explain. If you go into a restaurant or hotel and find in ze cooking an assortment of hair, zen w'at say you?"

"I should say that the cook was not particularly clean," said Thad, laughing.

"Vaire well; zat eez all zat can be said of zis gruel of yours; eet eez simply filthy: zat eez to say, full of hair."

"Ah, but, my friend, that is just the point that I want to prove. Now, do you imagine any one could eat that compound and remain healthy after it?"

"I do not know. I have known some vaire dirty people who were also vaire healthy people."

"But did you notice what kind of hair it is in this gruel?"

"No; no, eet eez impossible to tell, I think," growled the chemist.

"Did it occur to you to ascertain the nature of the hair?"

"To tell you ze truth, it did not," said the chemist, a little embarrassed.

"Then will you examine it again?"

"As you like."

Finally he broke out, enthusiastically:

"To be sure, to be sure! My God! v'at an eediot I vas!"

"Well?" said Thad, smiling at his enthusiasm.

"Vell? Vell? Eet eez not vell, ma friend; eet eez bad, vaire bad!"

"What is it?"

"Tiger's hair, by gar! Why should I be such an idiot ze ozzair time zat I did not discovaire zis? Tiger's hair, which I know to be used in Algiers to kill wiz! Where you get zis, Mistaire Burr?"

"From a sick room."

"And zey were giving zis horrid compound to ze patient, eh?"

"Yes."

"My God! Zen ze professional poisoners have arrive in zis country!"

"Yes; but I hope to land them on the Island, or a warmer country, before long," said Thad.

"I hope so," said the little chemist, enthusiastically. "You do not yet know ze name, eh?"

"Of the leader, yes."

"Vat eet eez?"

"Madame Vleric."

"My God!"

"Do you know her?"

"Do I know her? I should say zat I do. She was convicted in Paris of poisoning, and sent to ze galley for life twenty years ago, and was assisted to escape by von ozzair convict, an Englishman, who she afterward married. Zey went to Odessa, and from zair to St. Petersburg. From zair I do not know vere zey went. I have not since heard of her until zis minute."

"It is strange that she should have retained the same name."

"Zat eez her peculiarity. She eez nossing if not bold and defiant."

"She is a woman of considerable refinement, I should judge."

"Indeed, saire, she should be. She comes from ze nobility. She eez a—a marchioness, eef she dared own her title and right name."

"Then Vleric is not her right name?"

"Certainly not. She eez ze Marchioness La Chapelle," said the chemist. "By ze way," he continued, cocking his head upon one side, in his usual manner when he was thoughtful, "she had a daughter, a most beautiful girl, who was adopted by an American who was in Paris at ze time of her exportation. You know nossing of her, I presume?"

"No; although she has a young woman with her now."

"Have you seen her?"

"Only once, for an instant."

"You do not know w'at she eez like zen?"

"No."

"Let me tell you a leetle story, and zen I vill tell you how you vill know her. I was een Paris at ze time of the arrest of ze madame, and was among ze chemists who held ze autopsy on ze poisoned woman. Her leetle daughtaire was zen four years old. She persisted in coming into ze room vere ve vas at work, and finally von of ze chemists, to frighten ze child, ran at her wiz a scalpel. Zis frightened ze child vaire much, and she started to run, fell and the chemist fell ovair her, and ze knife struck ze child above ze eye, making an ugly wound."

"Ze strangest thing about eet vas, I saw ze child after she vas vell, and zere vas a scar exactly ze shape of ze letter L. Zis she vill carry to her grave, and by eet you can recognize her anywhere."

"Good; I shall look out for it, doctor; and thank you for the information. And now I must go. If you will kindly give me the certificate of your analysis."

"Oh, yes," said Dodorov; and at once sat down and wrote the certificate.

Thad then paid him for his work and took his leave.

He returned at once to his apartments, where he found Florence Seymour waiting for him, outside the door.

She smiled when she saw the detective, and he noticed that she appeared to be in a more cheerful mood than he had ever seen her.

"I have good news for you," she said, as soon as the detective was at her side.

"Indeed! I am glad of that," replied Thad, taking the thin little hand in his own strong palm. "What is it, Miss Seymour?"

"Call me Florence, won't you, please?" she said.

"Certainly, with pleasure," he answered, smiling good-humoredly.

"Well, the good news is, first, that Ida, that is, Mrs. Langly, the sick lady, is much better; and second, that my uncle, Colonel Manton, has adopted me as his daughter; I am to live at his fine Madison avenue house and he is to pay my mother so much a week, more than I could ever give her, for her support. Isn't that splendid?"

In lieu of a reply the detective opened the door and invited the girl to enter.

When they were inside, and the little governess was sitting on the sofa with her little feet dangling six inches from the floor, Thad pulled a chair up in front of her and sat down.

Then, and not till then, did he answer her question, and he did so as though there had been

no interruption in the conversation commenced in the hall.

"I am sorry, Florence," he said, "that I cannot share in your happiness, and I am still sorrier to cast one blight upon it by discouraging your hopes."

"Why, what do you mean, Mr. Burr?" she cried in great alarm.

"I mean that I do not believe in the report of the improvement in the condition of Mrs. Langly, for one thing; and I am sorry to see you going to your uncle's to live, for another."

"One thing at a time," said the little lady.

"Why do you not believe in the improvement in the poor lady's condition, Mr. Burr?"

"Because, for one thing, she will never improve so long as that crowd of murderers and murderesses are about her; and in the second place I can guess who told you she was improving, and I know his motive."

"Who do you think it was?"

"Colonel Manton, your uncle, told you, and his motive was to allay your suspicion of foul play, if you had any."

"Why, Mr. Burr, what could be uncle's motive for that?" cried the girl, with great consternation.

"The very thing, my dear girl," said Thad, warmly, "that makes me say that I am sorry to see you going to his house to live."

"You don't think uncle would do me any harm, do you, Mr. Burr?"

"I very much fear for it, Florence," said Thad, earnestly. "I know more about your uncle than you do, my girl, and I believe, nay, know him to be a very bad man; and if I had anything to say in the matter, I should say that you should not go to live with him."

"Oh, Mr. Burr, your words have made me very sad," said Florence, her eyes filling with tears. "I love my uncle, and I love you for your kindness to me. You are clever, and know the world much better than I do; but I am sure you are mistaken about my uncle. He is the kindest of men. Oh, Mr. Burr, you do not know how kind-hearted he is."

"Perhaps not. He may, indeed, have a soft side to his nature, but he is also a cold-blooded villain."

"Why do you say that to me, Mr. Burr? Do you not know that it breaks my heart to hear anything harsh said of him?"

"I am sorry to cause you any pain, my dear Florence, and I would gladly spare you; but the case is a desperate one. I see you blindly walking to destruction, possibly death, and I grasp you with grappling-irons to drag you back; what if the grappling-irons do tear the flesh and cause a little pain?"

"Listen, my girl. I said your uncle was a villain. I will prove it:

"The very day that I received your letter, notifying me of the affair at the Langly mansion, I saw your uncle in conversation with the woman, Annie Montroi. I was fortunate enough to get sufficiently near them to overhear their discourse, and what do you think I heard?"

"I cannot imagine, sir," whimpered Florence. "But I hope it wasn't anything bad."

"I heard your uncle make a contract with the woman to kill somebody!"

"What!" screamed the girl. "My uncle!"

"Yes, Marvin Manton," replied Thad. "And he agreed to give her and her associates five thousand dollars for the job. And to bind the contract he gave the woman a thousand dollars on the spot. I saw this with my own eyes, Florence."

"Oh, this is terrible!" she cried, wringing her hands and weeping.

"It is terrible, my girl, and that is the reason I dread to have you go to his house. Now, whom do you imagine they are going to murder?"

"I cannot imagine, Mr. Burr."

"I can."

"Whom?"

"Florence Seymour!"

The girl buried her face in her hands and gave herself to weeping for some time.

Thad did not disturb her.

After a long time she raised her head, and said, in a voice choked with sobs:

"Why, Mr. Burr, should my uncle wish to kill me? He has always been very kind to me and has always expressed his affection for me. Why, then, should he wish to murder me?"

"Why? I'll tell you why, Florence," said Thad in his kindest voice. "If you will take the trouble to go to some of the large insurance company's offices, and inquire, you will discover that he has had your life insured for a large sum. It costs a great deal of money to carry an insurance policy of, say, a hundred thousand dollars, and a business man likes to have prompt returns on his investments. And there is but one way of getting your returns on an insurance policy."

"Then you think my uncle has had my life insured that he might put me out of the way and get the insurance, do you?"

"I do."

Florence had now become calm and ceased her weeping. She was, as we have seen, a very sensible and reasonable girl ordinarily.

"Mr. Burr," she said, taking the detective's

hand, "forgive me for doubting your word a while ago. I know you would not deceive me, you have no reason to do so. But I thought you might be mistaken. I still think there is a chance for such a thing. Of course you will say that I am biased through affection for my uncle. That may be true. Still, I cannot believe in my heart that he could be guilty of what you say. Now, I will tell you what I am going to do. You will say I am foolish, but I am going to do the very thing that you warn me against."

Thad was silent for a moment or two.

"Very well," he said at last. "I cannot but admire your pluck, although I deprecate your want of discretion, Florence. Go on, if you think best; but be cautious, and if you get into trouble do not forget where to find a friend."

"Nobody knows how true a friend you are, Mr. Burr, better than I," said Florence, gratefully. "In the mean time I will thank you to keep me in sight just as though I had not disobeyed you, for there might come a time when I would need assistance and could not communicate with you."

"I should do that in any event, my girl," said Thad warmly, "for I feel perfectly sure that you will need a stanch friend in a very short time if you enter that house. And now I hope you will excuse me, as I must get ready to meet an appointment this evening."

Florence shook the detective's hand and took her leave.

CHAPTER XII.

PLAYING NURSE.

As soon as Florence had gone the detective went into his dressing-room and made himself up as a middle-aged Irishwoman.

Then putting such articles as he was likely to need into a reticule, took his departure for the Langlys, where he arrived about seven o'clock.

Mrs. Coburn had just begun her watch for the night a short time before, Annie Montroi having been on during the latter part of the afternoon; in fact all day, except the little while when she went down to meet the detective at Madison Square.

Thad handed her the letter of introduction, and when she had taken it to the light and read it over carefully, turned to him and said:

"Faith, an' how did the madam come to get ther loikes o' you ter assist, I dunno?"

Thad wasn't a bit put out by this interrogation. Indeed he expected any amount of impudence from this woman, whom he could see to be a coarse, brutal creature, with neither the refinement of Madame Vleric or the wit of Annie Montroi. And he answered her in her own style and rich brogue:

"Wurrah! an' thot's a mather entoirely wid ther madam hersilf, an' if ye'd be knowin', ye'll have ter ax her, an' not be botherin' me at all, at all."

"Whist! an' w'u'd ye hear the gab av her?" said Mrs. Coburn. "Yez'd think she were ther quane av ther airth, an' that too wid a brogue that ye'd be cuttin' wid a knoife, it's that thick entoirely."

With that she led the way into the sick chamber without another word.

When Thad got in the room, and removed his wraps, however, the woman looked him over from head to foot, and exclaimed:

"Murther o' Moses! w'u'd yez git onto the soize av him! Bedad, ye'd be thinkin' that it was ther baby hippopotamus, or the Oirish goiant in disguise!"

And no wonder.

A man always looks much larger dressed in feminine attire, and as Thad was a large man anyway he appeared to be something enormous in his present make-up.

So much so, indeed, that as soon as he exhibited a little firmness, he became a terror to Mrs. Coburn, a woman who was in the habit of ruhing wherever she was.

As soon as opportunity offered, Thad looked at the invalid, and, as he had a slight knowledge of medicine, he could see that she was very low, and sinking rapidly.

It should have been mentioned that the little Russian chemist, in his dealings with similar cases in the old country, had discovered a powerful antidote, and had given the detective a bottle of it.

The action of the tiger's hair, when cut up in short bits and administered to a person, was this: The short bits of hair, being unable to pass, stuck into the intestines; thus producing inflammation. The stomach soon became incapable of retaining food, and the patient wasted away and died of actual starvation.

The chemist's antidote was compounded of cordials, cinchona and cocaine, and acted at once as a stimulant, antiseptic and anaesthetic, cooled the bowels and created an appetite.

Thad had also procured some wholesome gruel to take the place of the poisoned compound.

He soon learned, to his disappointment, that Annie Montroi would not be there that night.

This was a double misfortune; for in the first place, the detective was anxious to see her when she was undisguised and off her guard; and in the second place, he feared, nay, was almost cer-

tain, that not being engaged, she would return to the madame's flat, release Burt and the others, and the whole gang would be upon him before morning and spoil his plans.

However, it could not be helped now, and he determined to make the most of his time before anything happened to disturb him.

The first thing to be done was to get the Coburn woman out of the way.

He had provided himself, among other things, with a bottle of gin, strongly tinctured with morphine.

So, after they had sat in moody silence for some time, Thad turned to the woman and said in a persuasive tone:

"W'u'd yez loike a wee drop ov ther cr'atur', I dunno?"

The woman brightened up at once.

Glancing about to make sure that nobody was near, she said:

"Faith, an' Oi w'u'd that same. Hav' yez any at all?"

"Have Oi?" said Thad, with a sly wink, drawing the bottle forth. "Is ther' wather in ther say, darlint? Put yer gob to that wanst," he went on, giving her the bottle.

Without a word the woman took the bottle, uncorked it and took a long pull at it.

So long, in fact, that Thad was prone to remark:

"On, begorrah, an' your mother niver whopped you for idin' yer breath, Oi'm thinkin'. W'u'd y' pavin' a drop at all? Faith, Oi'm as dhrov as a seven-year old cinder, entoirely."

"Oh!" said the woman, taking the half-emptyed bottle from her mouth and smacking her lips. "But that was good! An' it was loike pourin' wather into an ash-barrel, Oi was that dhroy."

"Faith, an' Oi'm thinkin' ye'r tellin' ther truth," said Thad, looking sadly at the bottle. "Bad cess ter yez entoirely, ye've scarcely left me enough ter wet me troat, ye murtherin' divvil!"

The woman laughed boisterously at what she considered a capital joke.

Thad pretended to take a long pull at the bottle, and then handing it back, said:

"Yez may as well hov the rist ov it. Yez already hov too much ter wade in an' not enough to shwim."

"Oh, wurrah, but you're a darlint," said the woman, taking the bottle again. "Here's that yez may niver doy till yez hov whiskers a yaird long."

"Dhrink hairy," said Thad.

With that she drained the bottle.

"Oh, but it's a blissing to mate the loikes av you wanst in a whoile," said Mrs. Coburn, yawning. "The murtherin' ould divvil av a madame w'u'd say yer tongue afire an' burnin' widout givin' yez a mortal drap. She's—she's—a-h, bedad, but Oi'm that shlapy Oi c'u'd shlape on ther top av a tilegraph pole, so Oi c'u'! Ou, ah-h! W'u'd yer moind, Mrs.—Mrs.—what ther divvil's yer name at all?"

"Coogan," said Thad.

"W'u'd yez moind luckin' afther the leddy awhoile, an' lettin' meself take a wee bit av a nap?"

"Av coarse, darlint; lay down an' have a shlape," said Thad, encouragingly. "It's precious toired yez air from long watchin'."

"Yis, from long watchin'," chimed in the woman, with a yawn. "It's not from dhrinkin' at all. Yez kin tistifoy ter that."

"Av coarse. It's not from dhrinkin', Mrs. Coburn; Oi kin swar ter that."

"An' ye'll not be tellin' 'em thot Oi tuck a wee dhrop at all, will yez?"

"Not Oi, darlint," replied Thad, consolingly. "That's a mather bechune ourselves. Lay down, now, darlint, an' hav' a good shlape. It's meself that'll kape things roight an' toight entoirely."

Without more persuasion Mrs. Coburn laid down upon a lounge provided for the nurses, and in less than a minute was snoring lustily.

Thad then approached the bedside of the sick lady.

Before he had time to say anything, and, in fact, while he was considering how he would approach her, the lady looked up wearily into his face, and seemed surprised at not finding it coarse and repulsive, like that of Mrs. Coburn's.

"You are the new nurse, are you?" she said in a feeble voice.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Thad. And then, before he could explain what he wished to, she continued:

"I was sorry to see that you gave liquor to Mrs. Coburn. If the madame had been here, she would not have permitted it. The woman has an ugly disposition at best, and when she gets hold of liquor, she becomes a brute."

"You need have no apprehensions on account of her, madame," said Thad. "She will trouble nobody to-night."

"Why," cried the invalid, looking up in surprise, "you do not talk like an Irishwoman, surely—"

"Sh-s-s-h!" cried Thad. "Not a word until I explain. The fact is, madame, that I am not a woman at all. I am a man, and a detective, and I have come to rescue you from imminent death at the hands of these wretches!"

"Why, what do you mean?" asked the lady, in bewilderment.

"Pray, do not get excited, my dear lady," said Thad kindly. "And before we talk any more, let me give you some of this cordial."

With that he drew forth the bottle of antidote, and poured some out into a spoon.

The lady swallowed it without demur, and as its effect was almost instantaneous, her eyes brightened a moment after, and she said in a clear, cheerful voice.

"Why, how well I feel! What is that you give me?"

"Simply an antidote to the slow poison these people are giving you."

"Poison?" she exclaimed. "Impossible. Why should they give me poison? They are simply nurses employed by my husband to take care of me during my illness."

"Yes, I know, and instructed and paid by your husband to murder you by inches!"

She was about to utter an outcry, but the cool, calm voice of the detective restrained her.

"Be calm, madam," he said. "Be reasonable. I will explain everything to you. But first you must leave this place. I will have the web of evidence woven about your intended slayers in a few days; but unless you are removed from their clutches at once, it may be too late to help you."

The lady by this time was calm and reasonable.

The kind, earnest voice of the detective had a soothing and reassuring effect upon the poor weary soul.

Looking up into his kindly eyes—those eyes that had seen so much sadness and never without pity—with a confiding expression, she said:

"Sir, I do not, I cannot doubt what you have told me. Your voice is too earnest and kind and your face is too honest to admit of deception. But tell me, why should my husband wish to put me out of the way?"

"I will answer that by asking you a question, madam. Has your husband always been kind to you?"

"I cannot say that he has," she answered in a faltering voice, "but—"

"Has he not on several occasions expressed a wish that you were out of his way?"

"Yes, I admit that he has, but—"

"Has he visited you frequently and regularly since your illness, and exhibited the solicitude for your recovery that a devoted husband would?"

"No, sir; he does not visit me very often, I confess; but there is good reason for that. In the first place, my husband is very sensitive and a few visits to a sick chamber renders him too ill to attend to his business. Besides he is very busy, often coming home after midnight, utterly worn out with fatigue, and he could not be expected to visit me at such times."

Thad fell into a reverie for a moment.

This lady's philosophy would have surprised some under the circumstances; but Thad saw in her only one more example of the thousands of devoted martyrs who daily sacrifice themselves to some selfish and brutal deity, and spurn the hand put forth to rescue them.

"Poor devoted and deluded saint," mused Thad. "Ready at the last moment to kiss away the stains from the hands red with her own heart's blood!"

Presently he resumed:

"All this aside, Mrs. Langly, although I know it to be all delusion, do you not know that your husband has had your life insured for a large sum within the last month?"

"Yes, sir, I know that," she said, with a troubled countenance that showed that his argument was beginning to tell. "But he explained that in case anything should happen it would be well to provide for the children."

"Were you not in robust health at the time the policies were taken out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Stronger, if anything than he."

"Yes, I think I was."

"Does it not strike you as a little strange, then, that he should have foreseen your present illness?"

"I have thought of that. But I attributed it to his keen foresight."

"Wonderful foresight, indeed, I should say. By the way, it does not seem to have occurred to him to have his own life insured."

"No. I have spoken to him about that, and he said that he was such a physical wreck that no insurance company would take him at any rate."

"That may or may not be," said Thad, earnestly "but the fact of his having your life insured for a hundred thousand dollars immediately after you had quarreled and he had threatened you with a separation, and then right on the heels of that you fall ill, shows that there is something wrong, even if I knew no more. But I do know more."

"Merciful Heavens! What is it?" she exclaimed in a pitiful voice.

"That your husband has hired Madame Vleric to poison you, for which he is to pay her five thousand dollars!"

"Do you know this?"

"I do."

"Can you furnish proof of it?"

"Yes."

"Great Heavens!"

"But not now. We have no time to lose. We should have been away from here an hour ago. Will you go with me?"

"Where?"

"To some quiet, safe retreat, where you can be nursed back to health while I convict your would-be murderers."

She was thoughtful a moment, and then said:

"If my strength is equal to it, I will."

"You require no strength, my dear lady, I will carry you. First let me see if the coast is clear."

And he went down-stairs to the front door. All was quiet and no one was in the hall.

Returning to the sick-room he removed his female apparel, and wrapped the patient in several blankets, and then raising her in his arms as though she had been an infant, started for the street.

But just as he descended into the lower hall the front door opened and in burst Burt, Robert Langly and Chalky Nig!

CHAPTER XIII.

AGAIN-T DESPERATE ODDS.

FOR a full minute neither the detective nor the new-comers seemed to realize the real state of affairs.

True, Thad recognized Burt and the others at a glance.

But the full force of the situation did not flash upon him at once.

As for the others, they appeared to be divided in opinion as to whether the apparition before them was a ghost, or a simple burglar.

And thus for a full minute both parties stood staring at each other, without offering to attack or retreat.

Thad was the first to recover his self-possession.

His first thought was to lay his burden down, and meet his enemies hand-to-hand.

But a moment's reflection showed him the folly of such a move.

His only hope was to dash by them so quickly and unexpectedly that they would not realize what had happened till he was gone.

No sooner had he made up his mind to this when he started to put it into execution.

Without appearing to notice the presence of the new-comers, he gathered his burden up into his arms more closely, and made a desperate dash for the door, which in their surprise they had forgotten to shut.

Three good strides put him past Langly, who was now in advance, and another would put him beyond Burt, who was next.

He fully expected resistance from Burt; but, to his surprise, the fellow seemed to be panic-stricken, and did not raise a hand to stay his progress.

Being past the two men, the detective had nothing else to fear.

The boy was near the door, but as yet he did not appear to have recognized him; and if he did, all he could do would be to shoot, which he would hardly have the presence of mind to do before the detective could clear the door.

All this took but a second to occur, and all these difficulties and advantages flashed through Thad's mind like lightning.

Two more strides would put him clear of the door, and he nerved himself for the effort.

One had already been taken, and he was on the point of taking the other, when suddenly, and with the rapidity of lightning, Chalky sprung to the door and shut it.

So quick and unexpected had been the action that Thad could not check himself until he ran slap against the door.

This put a different face upon matters.

It not only shut off Thad's retreat, but it brought Burt and Langly to their senses.

Burt was the first to act.

Stepping toward the detective in a swaggering gait, he said:

"Well, my fine feller, what yer up ter, say?"

As he said this, he aimed a blow at Thad's head.

Thad, handicapped as he was, with the woman in his arms, dodged the blow and gave the fellow a kick in the stomach that doubled him up on the floor.

Then, hurling the boy aside, he attempted to open the door, and had almost succeeded, when Chalky Nig, who was lying on the floor where Thad had thrown him, crawled up behind him and grabbed his legs.

The detective kicked vigorously to free himself, but the little mulatto clung with the persistence of death.

While thus detained, Langly suddenly appeared to realize that something ought to be done, and springing at the detective, deliberately dealt him a blow that staggered him.

Having thus lost his balance, and having the heavy burden in his arms and the boy clinging to his feet, it is little wonder that he fell.

But even under all these disadvantages, Thad did not forget the nature of his charge, and fell in such a manner that the sick woman came on top of him, so that she was not injured by the fall.

Scarcely had he struck the floor, however, when Burt, who had by this time recovered from the kick Thad had administered, sprung to his feet, and grasping the sick woman, tore her from the detective's arms, before, in his stunned condition, he could resist.

As soon as he got her away, the ruffian ran up-stairs with her.

In the mean time, Langly sprung at the prostrate detective, and began kicking him in the head.

He did not succeed in inflicting any injury to speak of, though, for before he had kicked the third time, Thad grabbed his foot and hurled Langly crashing to the floor.

The next instant Thad was upon his feet, and in turn dealt Langly a blow with his fist that rendered him insensible.

At that moment Chalky made another attempt to get hold of the detective's foot, but Thad was too quick for him this time, and landed the little rascal a kick that rendered him insensible.

So much absorbed had the detective been in getting rid of these two that he did not notice the approach of Burt until that villain was right upon him.

However, he saw the fellow in time to dodge a blow aimed at Thad's head, and in turn dealt the ruffian a sledge-hammer that sent him reeling to the floor.

To make sure work this time, Thad pulled the fellow's hands together across his back and snapped on a pair of handcuffs.

This done, he lost no time in mounting the stairs again and making for the sick chamber, where he hoped to find bischarge.

A few hasty strides along the hall brought him to the door, which, to his surprise he found locked.

This was an unforeseen difficulty.

What was to be done?

He could easily break the door in, but that would create a disturbance and bring the rest of the household upon him.

Just then a thought occurred to him.

Why, with all the rumpus created down-stairs by his fight with the two men and boy, had not the household, especially the servants, been alarmed and put in an appearance?

Could it be, after all, that the whole *melee* had been so noiseless as not to be heard up-stairs, or was everybody too badly frightened to venture forth?

At all events, he thought, inasmuch as they had not been disturbed by the late fight, he might venture to try the door.

Just then another happy thought occurred to him.

As Burt had locked the door, he must have the key.

And as Burt was unconscious, or, if not unconscious, handcuffed and helpless, it was a simple matter to go through his pockets and get the key.

With this end in view the detective darted down-stairs without delay.

Burt was lying just where he had fallen, and did not move a muscle when Thad approached him.

The detective at once proceeded to rifle the fellow's pockets.

But, after going through, one by one, every pocket the fellow possessed, he was disappointed and disgusted at finding no key.

Discouraged with his failure, the detective was on the point of returning up-stairs with the view of breaking the door open, when his attention was attracted by something bright lying on the floor.

A thrill of joy shot through him as he stooped to pick it up.

And he was still more pleased when he discovered what it was.

It was, without doubt, the sick-room doorway, and Burt had dropped it as he fell after Thad struck him.

Without a moment's delay the detective dashed up-stairs again.

A moment later he opened the sick-room door, and entered the chamber.

Everything was just as he had left it, except that the invalid was lying across the bed in the confused state in which the ruffian had tossed her in his haste. Mrs. Coburn still slept.

She was so badly frightened that she did not recognize Thad at first, and evidently mistaking him for the ruffian, Burt, began to piteously plead for her life.

"For heaven's sake, have pity!" she cried, in despair. "If it is money you want, you shall have all you want, only spare my life!"

"My dear madam," said Thad, in his kindly voice, "have no fear; it is I, and I have come to save you."

"Thank God!" she cried, actually raising herself from the bed, clasping the detective about the neck as he bent over her, and kissing him. "Thank God it is you instead of that murderer," she cried rapturously.

"Be calm, my dear madam," admonished Thad. "Excitement may be detrimental to you. We must make haste and get away from here. Do you feel as though you could stand the jaunt?"

"Oh, yes, I am strong," she said, hopefully.

"The sight of your face has put new life into

me. Take me away, quick, and you shall be richly rewarded, sir."

Without more ado, Thad wrapped her carefully in the blankets again, and raised her in his strong arms.

A moment later he was at the door about to depart.

When he opened the door he was surprised to find the hall in darkness, whereas it had been as light as day when he came in.

Knowing that he could never find his way down in safety with the lady in his arms. Thad turned back, laid the invalid down for a moment while he took his dark-lantern from his pocket and lighted it.

This done he resumed his burden and approached the door again.

It was so dark in the hall that nothing could be seen, but he did not care to flash his light while he was inside the room where there was plenty of light.

Just as he reached the door he was surprised and staggered with a brilliant light being suddenly flashed in his face from the outside.

And almost simultaneously with the light came the sharp report of a pistol.

Thad felt a dull pain in his side, and before he could realize what had happened he felt his strength oozing away, the burden slipped from his grasp, the room went spinning about and he sunk unconscious upon the floor.

Before his senses had quite forsaken him, however, and the physical world was gradually fading away, he heard a wild, derisive peal of laughter.

It was that of a woman.

And as he sank upon the floor the last ray of his departing vision showed him a beautiful but fiendish female face, and there was a scar above the left eye in the shape of the letter L.

How long the detective was unconscious he had no means of knowing.

When he recovered his senses he had some difficulty in recollecting where he was.

There was a dull, heavy pain in his side, and this, probably, more than anything else enabled him to recall the incidents which had recently taken place.

The place was dark, and as he staggered to his feet he felt a shiver of cold, and the air felt damp.

Finally it occurred to him to strike a match, and he put his hand in his pocket for one, which he soon found and lit.

Holding the match aloft and surveying his surroundings, he was surprised at the result.

Stone walls encircled him in every direction, and the floor upon which he had been lying was cement. Only somebody had been merciful enough to spread a bit of carpet under him.

The apartment was of immense size, and he began to grope about in search of an outlet, lighting match after match to assist him in his search.

Groping around the wall for a long time, he finally came to a door, and, although it was locked, he was delighted to find that the key was on the inside. He lost no time in unlocking the door and opening it, when to his supreme delight, he found it led to a flight of steps, and that the steps led to the open air.

A thrill of joy shot through him, when he looked up and saw the stars.

He started to mount the steps, but he found it no easy job in his weak state from loss of blood, but he finally managed to drag himself up to the top of the stairs, and once more breathed the pure air of heaven.

Now he realized where he had been.

It was nothing more or less than the basement of some house. What house he had no idea; but supposed it to be that of the Langlys.

A little investigation proved to him that he was in an inclosure of some kind, probably a back yard.

This proved to be the case, and all search failed to discover a way out.

He found a gate, but it was locked, and the wall was ten feet high.

From the appearance of the sky he judged that it could not be long before daylight, and consequently it was very dark.

Finally the detective discovered some vines clambering over the wall. This was his opportunity for escape.

Grasping the vines he soon succeeded in climbing to the top of the wall.

Once he had gained this point, he could see where he was. From the foot of the wall he saw an alley leading along the side of the house to the street. But it was no easy matter to get down.

He knew, however, that delay was dangerous, and might be fatal, and although it was ten feet down to a hard pavement, he determined to jump.

Getting down and grasping the top of the wall with his hands, he allowed himself to hang down. Another moment and he had let go and dropped to the pavement below.

As he did so he was surprised to hear a gruff voice behind him saying:

"What are you a-doin' here?"

And turning saw two servants of the house, one of them the butler, each with a pistol leveled at him.

CHAPTER XIV.

BUYING LIBERTY.

THAD was more than usually set back by the appearance of the two burly footmen, or rather footman and butler.

Ordinarily he would have cared little for their strutting appearance of valor, for he knew in reason that they could not hit the side of a house if they shot at it, but in his present weak condition from loss of blood, and somewhat disheartened by his late failures, he was a little embarrassed by his present situation.

For a moment he stared vacantly at the two bombastic fellows, prancing about with revolvers in their hands (it was getting sufficiently light now to see them fairly well), but all at once the absurdity of the situation flashed upon the detective.

His first thought was to frighten the life out of them, and to this end he put his hand back for his revolver.

To his horror and dismay it was gone.

At the same time he noticed a derisive grin on the menials' faces.

If there is anything more irritating to an intellectual man or an athlete it is the derisive laugh of a fool or imbecile.

Thad was angry for a moment, but it was all over in an instant. He was almost angry with himself for honoring such creatures enough to get angry at them.

Looking straight at the butler with an expression of contempt, he said:

"Say, young feller, what's de matter wid you, anyway?"

This adopting of their own dialect and swagger rather took them by surprise.

"What's de matter wid you?" said one of them, at last.

"Ain't nothin' de matter wid me, see?" said Thad; "only if you coves don't gimme me guns in short order I'll make it hot for ye; I'm talkin'."

"Oh, go 'long," said one of the flunkies. "You're de bloke dat was up-stairs playin' off woman, an' de gal put de le'd into ye, den we rowed you in de cellar, see?"

"Dat's all right," said Thad. "Dey did git de best of me dat time; but, say, don't you chaps want to make a hundred dollars apiece real easy?"

They both pricked their ears at the sound of a hundred dollars.

"What d'ye mean, say?" asked one.

"I means dat if you coves 'll give me me guns w'at ye've got dare, I'll give ye each a hundred cold."

"No humbug?"

"No humbug."

"What d'ye say, Ferguson?" said the footman to the butler.

"I don't mind," replied the butler, "if it's a sure go."

"Oh, it's a sure go all right enough," said Thad.

"Oh right, then, fork over," said the butler, putting his pistol down at his side and holding out his hand.

The footman followed his example.

No sooner had they done so, and Thad saw that they were completely off their guard, when he made a spring at them, knocked their pistols out of their hands with an alternate blow from each hand, and then tripping them up.

The two flunkies tumbled heels over head to the pavement, and the detective picked up his pistols and leveled them at the fellows.

"Will you have your hundred dollars hot or cold?" he said laughing.

"Please don't shoot, please don't shoot!" they cried in a chorus.

"I won't on one condition," said Thad.

"What's that?" asked the butler.

"That you will tell me what they have done with the sick lady, Mrs. Langly."

"She is in the house—in the same room you saw her in."

"Don't lie to me, you villain! If they have removed her and I find it out, it will go hard with you. I will send you to the Penitentiary along with your master."

"Graciou! Are you going to send him to the Penitentiary?" asked the butler in horror.

"Yes, and most of the others of the family, if they don't mind."

"What have dey done, sir?"

"You know what they have done, you rogues."

"Before Heaven we don't, sir."

"Do you mean to say that you don't know that your master is having his wife murdered by slow degrees?"

"We never dreamed of such a t'ing," said the butler.

"Well, that is what he is doing," said Thad fiercely, "and if you two don't want to suffer with the rest of them you had better do just what I tell you."

"That we will, sir," said the butler.

"Very well, I will be here to-morrow evening about eleven o'clock. I will be disguised but you will know me by my saying Lesser when I come to the door."

"Lessay?"

"That's the word."

"Why, dat's de word dat de old madame uses so much," said the footman.

"Yes, that is her word, and that is the reason I use it. When I come to the door I will give you the word, and you must admit me. Be careful that no one knows about my presence. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the butler.

"Very well. Now, if everything goes right you will get the hundred dollars apiece that I promised you if you would give me the pistols. As you didn't give me the pistols I didn't give you the hundred dollars. If everything doesn't go on right, I'll put a bullet through each of your heads!"

"You can trust us, sir," said the butler in a subdued voice.

"All right; I hope I can. And now I will leave you."

With that Thad took his leave.

He was still very weak; but he soon found himself revived by the cool morning air, and as soon as he got down town he went to a surgeon of his acquaintance and had his wound dressed.

The surgeon told him that, while the wound was not particularly serious, not one man out of a thousand would be walking around with it.

After taking a strong cup of coffee, the detective returned to his lodgings, undressed and went to bed.

He slept till nearly noon and rose refreshed and feeling ready for work.

When he had dressed himself and got his breakfast, he again returned to his studio to attend to some correspondence, when who should he find waiting for him but Nevin.

As soon as the detective was near enough to speak to he said:

"No more money, old fellow."

Thinking he meant that he had no more money, Thad said:

"All right, my boy, come inside."

Nevin followed the detective into the sitting-room, and when they were seated Nevin took out a good cigar and gave it to Thad, who was a little surprised at the action, as Nevin seldom had either cigars or money.

"Well, old fellow, how much this time?" said Thad.

"A cool ten thousand," replied Nevin.

"Come, what the deuce are you talking about? Do you take me for a national bank?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Nevin, apparently surprised at Thad's remark.

"Simply that I have no such sum as ten thousand dollars to lend."

"Who the blazes asked you for a loan of ten thousand dollars?"

"You did."

"I beg your pardon, I did nothing of the sort."

"Do you mean to say that you did not ask me to loan you a cool ten thousand?" demanded Thad, impatiently.

"I did not. What I said, or intended to say, was, that I had dropped onto ten thousand. An uncle of mine had the good sense to die the other day, and the good taste to will me ten thousand of his hard-earned rocks."

"And you will proceed to get away with it a trifle faster than the old gentleman earned it, I suppose?"

"Will I? Well. And that is why I say he had the good taste to leave it to me. I will spend it for nothing which can in any way offend art."

"I have no doubt. By the way, have you seen Armstrong lately?"

"Just what I came over to tell you about," cried Nevin enthusiastically.

"Well?"

"Well, the chap is in great trouble."

"How is that?"

"Why, you know he was betrothed to Alice Langly, although he liked Victoria best."

"Yes."

"Well, it seems that he called the other evening and found Alice absent. Victoria was there, and being in one of her happy moods, she entertained the young man very graciously and cordially, as you know she can do. Armstrong, mistaking her prank, (for that is all it was, there is no heart of feeling in the woman,) for affection, allowed his own passion to get the best of him.

"Well, the upshot of it was, he made a fool of himself, declared that she was the only woman he ever loved or could love, and that he would die for her, and a lot more of similar rot, and finally got down upon his knees in regular cavalier style.

"And what did Victoria do?" asked Thad, laughing. "Although I can guess."

"Well, guess," said Nevin.

"She laughed at him."

"Nothing of the kind. She was very earnest with him, if his statement is to be credited. Sat down and talked coolly to him, like a mother-in-law the first week after you're married. She told him that he was a young man of fortune, with bright prospects, and could marry the best girl in the city, and shouldn't waste his time courting such women as she is. That she is unworthy of him and could only bring him disgrace and shame."

"That is in keeping with her frankness," said

Thad, "but I'm surprised that she had not more tact than to make this confession to Armstrong, from whom they expected to derive a good deal of money, a commodity the family will soon be in need of. But how did the poor innocent fellow take it?"

"Oh, he made a worse fool of himself than ever after that, swore that he would marry her if all the world turned against him for it, that if she were in the slums he would go there after her. And she listened to his harangue for a long time, but finally got tired of it."

"Then what?"

"She called him a fool, an idiot, a baby, and all that sort of thing."

"And didn't that cool his ardor?"

"The contrary, it increased it. He admitted all she said, and interpreted all her revilings as words of endearment."

"He is more of an ass than I imagined," said Thad.

"Then she lost her temper, a thing very rare with her, and perhaps it was put on for a purpose, after all. At all events, she pretended to get very angry and he believed she was, and she accused him of being a traitor, of bringing a detective into the house to probe their family secrets and try to ruin them, and finally ordered him from the house."

"Poor fool! Still it would be for his good," said Thad. "Although I don't see why his rupture with Victoria should affect his arrangement with Alice."

"It will, for Victoria rules that household," said Nevin. "The funniest part of it all is, he still thinks that it was I who went with him that night, and he is dead sour on me in consequence."

"Can't you convince him that it was another man in disguise?"

"I never tried. Didn't know whether you were ready to have him undeceived or not."

"Oh, yes, there is no good of keeping up the farce any longer. Justify yourself, my boy, and if he won't believe you I will make-up again, go there with you, and remove the disguise in his presence. That will certainly convince him."

"Yes, I should think so. But what do you think the young sap-head contemplates doing now?" said Nevin.

"Commit suicide?"

"No; nothing as sensible as that. He has discovered the facts about the poisoning affair, and instead of being horrified and repulsed by it as anybody else would be, he thinks there must be a good reason for it some way, and considers Victoria a victim of somebody or something. So now he proposes to go to Robert Langly and offer him all the money he wants to help him out of the difficulty in case he gets into any."

"Well, he will get into one in very short order," said Thad. "I shall get out warrants for the whole lot of them to-day, at least the female poisoners; although I may spare him for a day or two for the purpose of obtaining more evidence against him, as well as getting a little more evidence against Victoria."

"Do you think she is into it, too?" said Nevin, in surprise.

"Do I think it? I know it. But it is another thing to prove it."

"How do you know it?"

"She confessed it, or rather boasted of it. There is only one thing that puzzles me, and that is to know how Alice stands on the subject. It seems impossible that she shouldn't know all about what is going on in the house, and yet she looks and talks like an innocent little woman. As for Victoria, she is bad all the way through, and she glories in it."

"Too bad," mused Nevin. "From the account of her given by Armstrong, she must be very beautiful and fascinating, and I was on the point of going with him when this rupture occurred, and even then I thought of calling, on the strength of having been there by proxy. By Jove! I was becoming fascinated without seeing her. But, old fellow, I must go. By the way, you haven't a ten about you—"

"What?"

"I beg your pardon," said Nevin, actually blushing. "I had forgotten that I had plenty of money, and it has become second nature to me to always strike a friend for a loan before I leave him. No harm, I hope."

"None at all, old fellow. It will come soon enough, no doubt."

"Oh, yes; good-by."

"Good-by, my boy."

He had no more than gone, when there was a timid rap at the door, and when Thad opened it, he found Florence Seymour standing there, pale and haggard, trembling in every limb, and her eyes wet with weeping.

CHAPTER XV.

A PATHETIC STORY.

THAD led the little governess into his sitting-room and she sunk wearily upon the sofa, her little feet flying up as usual.

It was some time before she could stifle her sobs enough to speak.

Thad waited patiently for her grief to wear itself out.

Finally she became more calm, dried her tears, and said:

"Oh, Mr. Burr, such a time as I have had!"

Again her sorrow got the best of her and she broke down.

But after a minute or two she succeeded in controlling her feelings, and continued:

"If I had only taken your advice, how much agony I would have avoided."

All this was Greek to the detective, and he was so curious to know what had happened that he asked:

"Well, what has happened, little girl?"

"Why, you know I went to live with my uncle."

"Yes."

"You advised me not to go, but I would do it. Well, I went there yesterday afternoon, was cordially received, and everything went on all right till I went to my room to retire.

"I had only been in the room a little while when there was a knock at my door. I opened it and found a beautiful lady standing there. I had never seen her before, but she smiled and said she was a member of the household, so I invited her in.

"She came in and sat down, and we talked for a long time. She appeared to be acquainted with my affairs and those of the family, and talked a great deal about my future prospects. I liked her, she was so gentle and kind in her manner, and there was something so musical and soothing in her voice, for all the world like Victoria Langly's, when she wanted to be sweet; and then this lady was so frank and open.

"Finally she said she must go. And then she noticed that I was very pale and nervous. I hadn't noticed it myself; but she did, and persuaded me that I was not well, and must take something. So she went away, and pretty soon came back with a bottle something which she said was cordial, and told me to take a wine-glass full of it before going to bed, and again in the morning.

"I thanked her, and told her I would. She then kissed me good-night, and went away.

"She had been gone but a little while, and I had just poured out a wine-glass full of the cordial, when there was another knock at the door.

"When I opened the door, who do you suppose was there?"

"Your uncle?"

"No, sir, Chalky Nig!"

"Who?"

"The mulatto boy they call Chalky Nig."

"What did he want?"

"He put his finger on his lip to indicate silence, and glided softly into the room. As soon as he was inside he looked about curiously, and finally seeing the cordial on the stand and one glass of it poured out, he said: 'Ah, thought so! She has been here, has she?' I said, 'Whom do you mean?' He said, 'Cora; and she left you some cordial, didn't she?' I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Don't drink it, Miss Seymour, it's poisoned. It will make you sick, and then them will come and stay with you a long time, two weeks, maybe, and when them go away you'll be dead.' I asked him whom he meant by 'them,' and he said, 'Madame Vleric.' I asked him if he was not still in the madame's employ, and he replied that he was. I asked him how it was then that he came to warn me not to drink the cordial. He said: 'Cause I like you. You kept me from getting a beating one time,' which is a fact. Madame Vleric was going to beat him one time, and I interfered and saved him."

"Well, you didn't drink the cordial, of course," said Thad.

"No, sir. The boy went away then, and he was no more than gone when the lady he had spoken of as Cora, came back. She looked anxiously about and asked if anybody had been there. Not wishing to betray the boy, who had saved my life, I told her a lie, and said that there had not.

"She became very angry and said that she knew better; that I was lying, for she had heard talking. She then asked me why I had not drank the cordial. I told her that I was waiting until I got undressed so as to take it the last thing before going to bed, as she had instructed me.

"At this she became still more angry; said I did not intend to take it, and lest I should forget, I should take it while she was there.

"I made all kinds of excuses—I didn't like to tell her that I knew it to be poisoned—but it was no use. She was determined that I should drink it. Then I became determined that I would not and she caught me in her arms—I was like a child in her grasp—and attempted to force me to drink it.

"All I could do then was to close my mouth and clinch my teeth. She pressed the glass so hard against my lips that they bled. Finally, in the struggle the glass was knocked out of her hand, fell to the floor and broke.

"At this she flew into a terrible passion. Oh, Mr. Burr, I never saw anything like it. I thought she would tear me to pieces. She threw me down and choked me, and held a knife over me, brandished it in my face, and pressed the point of it against my breast until the blood started.

"Finally she said she guessed she wouldn't

kill me, as I wasn't worth it; that if I had been handsome she would."

"If you had been handsome?" interrupted Thad, remembering Victoria's words. "Every handsome woman hates every other handsome woman," but he knew it could not have been she.

"Yes, sir, that is what she said," said Florence.

"Do you remember Victoria's words the night she came upon us in the conservatory, and she was leading me away into the drawing-room, Florence?"

"I do, for it hurt me at the time."

"What were they?"

"I am not jealous of her, because she is not pretty enough, or something like that."

"Yes, that is in substance what she said. Well, did the beautiful lady's remark remind you of Victoria's words?"

"No, sir, I was too badly frightened to think of anything just then; but when I think of it now I can see a resemblance. Still, I know it could not have been she."

"Why? Don't you think Victoria would be capable of doing such a thing?"

"Oh, yes, she is capable of any amount of cruelty. But in the first place, Victoria would not think of entering my uncle's house, and in the second place, even supposing her to have been disguised, this woman was much larger than Victoria, in every way. Besides, she was a light blonde, with very fair skin and blue eyes."

"Were there any marks or peculiarities about her face by which you would recognize her if you should see her again?"

"Yes, sir, there was one thing I noticed—could not help but notice—over her left eye was a scar."

"Indeed?" cried Thad. "What was it like?"

"Like—let me see—like the letter L."

"Then it was—but no. Florence, did you ever see the woman they call Annie Montroi?"

"Yes, sir, several times."

"Had this woman any resemblance to her?"

"None in the least. Annie is also dark, and a much smaller woman."

"Did you ever study Annie's face sufficiently to notice any peculiarities, if they existed?"

"I think so, sir."

"And you never saw anything like a scar upon her left eye?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Yes, sir. I remember distinctly that Annie has a smooth, olive complexion, and very heavy eyebrows. This lady's complexion was not particularly smooth, was of a yellowish-white, peculiar to blonde people, and her eyebrows were very delicate and very even, except where the scar cut into the left one."

"Now, I want to ask you if you took any particular notice of Victoria's face."

"Yes, sir, I have."

"You never noticed anything like a scar over her left eye, did you?"

"Why, Mr. Burr, you don't imagine Victoria Langly and Annie Montroi are one and the same person, do you?" cried Florence in astonishment.

"Never mind. Please answer my question," retorted Thad, firmly.

"No, sir, certainly not."

"Can you recall the form of her eyebrows at this time?"

"Distinctly. They are also heavy and black, but not so wide as Annie's, and more arched."

"Then you do not think it possible that this Cora was either Annie Montroi or Victoria Langly, do you, Florence?"

"I am certain of it, sir."

"Nor that Victoria and Annie are the same?" said Thad.

"Impossible."

"There is only one infallible proof of the fact, Florence."

"What is that, sir?"

"Have you seen them together?"

"I don't know that I have exactly that, but the next thing to it. I have left Annie in the sick-room and gone directly to Victoria's room, or the parlor and found Victoria there."

"You are sure of this?"

"Yes, sir; because on one occasion in particular, Annie sent me with a message to Victoria. I carried it to her in her room, and then went back to Annie again."

"That is proof enough," said Thad, with a disappointed air. "Still, I am not quite ready to give up my theory yet. But go on with your story, Florence: what did the woman do after she decided not to kill you?"

"She raved about the room awhile, and then, with the remark that I would never leave the room alive, went out, shut the door and locked it."

"Nervous and frightened nearly out of my senses, I sunk into another arm-chair and sat there I do not know how long."

"Finally, and it must have been very late, I became aware that I was cold. That sort of brought me to my senses, and I undressed and went to bed. But I could not sleep. I was oppressed with a feeling of terror and dread that made me afraid to go to sleep."

"At last I could not stand it any longer. The more I thought of my situation the more I dreaded to see daylight which would bring my slayers. I got up and dressed myself, and then sat down to think. I at length determined to try to escape. Oh, how I wished then that you were there! And how many times I wished that I had taken your advice."

"I first tried the door, and, as I might have expected, could not get it open. I got upon a chair and opened the transom, but after a little reflection saw the folly of attempting to escape in that direction, as I would be almost sure to meet somebody in the hall, if indeed, the woman Cora had not heard me getting out and stopped me. I next opened one of the windows and looked down. It was very dark, but I could make out enough to see that it was a long way down to the ground. There is only an air-shaft between my uncle's house and the next one, and there is a window in the other house directly opposite the one in my room. A thought struck me. I craned my neck and saw that there was a window in my uncle's house only a yard away from mine. I had not the least idea what room the window belonged to, but my mind was made up what I should do."

"I took several slats out of my bed and laid them across from my window-sill to that in the other house, and got out on the platform thus formed."

"I knew it was hazardous, because the slats only caught on the sill a half an inch or so, and the slightest slip either way would precipitate me to the pavement many feet below, which would be instant death. But I know it was death if I remained in the room."

"I walked as carefully as I could to the edge of my bridge, clung on to the stone window-facing with my nails and swung myself across to the other window. I was now in an awkward situation. One foot on the slats and the other on the window sill, three feet away."

"The next thing was to get the window open. I tried it, pulled and tugged with all my might, but it would not raise. It was evidently locked. What was to be done then I did not know. Finally I thought of a paper-knife I had seen in my room. If I only had that, I thought, I might slip it between the sash and unlock the window. But the trouble was to get back. However, I knew it would not do to give up now; so I made a desperate effort and got back upon the bridge. From there it was easy to return to my room. Procuring the paper knife, I again got out upon the bridge and by the same painful means swung myself over to the other window-ledge again."

"Now came the worst part of my work—to hold on to the sash with my nails and unlock the window. Oh, Mr. Burr, it makes my flesh creep when I think of it now! It only shows what a person can do when urged by desperation."

"It does indeed," said Thad, "and above all, it shows you to be a little heroine. Well, you got the window unlocked?"

"Yes, sir, I finally got it unlocked and raised, although I cannot imagine now how I did it without falling. As soon as I got it up I stepped inside. Fortunately it was the bath-room and the door leading into the hall was unlocked. I went into the hall and found it as light as day. I had to pass my own room and several others to reach the stairs, and you may believe I made tracks, though I ran as lightly as I could. I got past all the rooms and reached the stairs, and then one of the doors opened and Cora came out."

"She at once gave the alarm, but I darted down-stairs like lightning, reached the bottom and turned into the hall, when I ran into the butler's arms!"

"Then what?" cried Thad, excitedly.

"Luckily the butler, who is fat, and was coming toward me at a lively gait, stubbed his toe on a mat just as I ran into his arms, and fell sprawling to the floor. I fell, too, but managed to get up first, got to the front door and made my escape, just at daylight."

"Where have you been ever since?"

"In Central Park. I found a secluded summer-house and staid there till I thought I could venture to come here, for I knew you would protect me."

"And you were not mistaken," said Thad, warmly. "For you are a brave, noble little girl."

CHAPTER XVI. A NEW FRIEND.

"AND now, Florence," said Thad, rising, after she had finished her story, "if you will excuse me, I will get to work. I have several matters to attend to this afternoon. I think you had better remain here for the present. You are safe here."

"Yes, sir, if you will allow me, I will remain here," returned Florence.

"By the way, you have had no breakfast. I will have some sent up to you. I do not know why I should have been so thoughtless as not to think of that."

"You did not know it till a moment ago," said the little lady.

"No, I did not, that is true. Well, good-by."

You will have your breakfast in a few minutes."

And the detective was off.

After stopping long enough to order Florence's breakfast from a restaurant, Thad went directly to Police Headquarters and procured warrants for the arrest of Madame Vleric, Annie Montroi, Sarah Coburn and Robert Langly, for conspiracy in attempting the life of Ida Langly.

He then returned to his lodgings.

Florence was as happy as a lark, singing and tidying the place up as merrily as though nothing had ever happened to dampen her spirits. Indeed, one seeing her now would scarcely believe it to be the same person who was telling her sad story and weeping an hour or two before.

It was late in the afternoon when the detective returned, and as he came by the restaurant he ordered dinner for two sent up.

Florence was delighted when she saw the dishes, smoking hot, coming up on the dumb-waiter, and busied herself about setting the table as though she had always been there.

Thad was amused to see the little lady—she looked like a child of ten—flying about.

At length everything was on the table and she announced that dinner was ready.

Thad sat down, and she, scarcely able to put her chin above the table, acted as hostess, and poured the tea.

"This is a delightful little dinner, Florence," said Thad, helping her to some roast beef and potatoes, "and it is all the more so for having so pleasant a companion."

"You may be sure it is a relief to me to be free from those people," said Florence, feelingly. "And I do not know how I shall ever repay you, Mr. Burr, for offering me a safe retreat where I have no fear of their coming."

"I am double paid already, Florence, by your gratitude. And I think you had better remain here until I get sufficient evidence to convict all these people, or at least get them locked up, for I feel that you will never be entirely safe while any of them are at large."

"Do you think you will arrest my uncle, Mr. Burr?" asked Florence anxiously, looking up through the umbrage of dishes.

"I should not wonder," returned Thad. "He certainly deserves it for the pain he caused you last night; if he had done no worse."

"But now that I am out of danger, don't you think you might spare him?" she said in a pleading tone.

"Just like a woman," said the detective, impatiently. "It is no fault of your uncle's that you are not now bedridden, full of poison, and in a fair way of becoming a dead girl."

"I know it, but—"

"Florence, you are too sensible and reasonable a girl to think of pleading the cause of a man of as little principle as your uncle, and you ought to know my hatred of these cowardly villains too well by this time to speak to me about showing them any mercy. There might be some excuse, some extenuation for a man who murders another in cold blood; but the man who deliberately plans the death of a defenseless girl for gain is too contemptible to think of, and there is no punishment bad enough for him."

"That is all very true, Mr. Burr," said Florence, her eyes growing moist; "but you mustn't forget that he is my uncle."

"I do not forget that, Florence. Neither do I forget that he would have been your murderer, only for your own heroism."

"That is true," said Florence, with a deep sigh. "I wish that poor Ida Langly had had a little heroism about her."

"So she might have had, if she had been warned in time. But she is like yourself in blind devotion. Even when she was lying at the point of death at their—I should say, her husband's hands, it took all my logic to convince her that her husband was not an angel."

"Poor lady," sighed Florence. "You have not succeeded in removing her yet, have you?"

"No. I am going to make another expedition to-night. I didn't tell you about my adventure last night, did I?"

"No, sir."

Thad recited the details of his experience in attempting to rescue the poor sick woman, and when he had finished, Florence said:

"Why, sir, how could you sit quietly listening to my pitiful, stupid romance when you had one of real tragic interest of your own?"

"Of the two, yours was the most heroic, my dear Florence. True, I have to fight against odds; but I am accustomed to that sort of thing. You were fighting against greater odds, considering your strength, and had not the experience behind you."

"You say you are going up there to make another attempt to-night, sir?"

"Yes."

Florence was silent for a little while.

Finally she said:

"May I make a request of you, Mr. Burr?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Let me go with you."

"Nonsense!"

"But I particularly desire to go, sir."

"It is impossible."

"Why impossible?"

"Because I may have to fight—in fact, it is impossible to tell what I will have to do and undergo before I get that poor lady out of that den, and you would be in great peril. I could not think of letting you go."

"Mr. Burr, please listen to me. I am headstrong, as you saw when you tried to dissuade me from going to live with my uncle. But that same episode ought to show you that I am not wanting in courage and tact. You have been very kind to me, and one of my reasons for desiring to go with you to-night is a wish to do something, if ever so little, toward repaying you the debt of gratitude I owe you. I believe I may be of some use to you, and, above all, I should enjoy the excitement that will be in it. Won't you please let me go, Mr. Burr?"

"Oh, I presume I may as well say yes first as last; I will have to say it anyway."

"Oh, thank you, sir!" cried the little lady, clapping her little hands with delight.

"I will have to disguise you in some way."

"Yes, sir; how are you going to be disguised, sir?"

"As an old man."

"Very well, then, why can't I go as your son?" said Florence, enthusiastically.

"That will do capitally," said Thad, "and I have just the suit here for you."

Saying which he went into his wardrobe and brought out a suit of boy's clothes.

"Do you see that suit?" he said, holding them up.

"Yes, sir; and just my size," cried Florence in raptures. "How came you to have a suit like that, Mr. Burr? You surely never wore it."

"No, Florence, I never wore it; but that suit of clothes has a history."

"Do tell me," she cried, child-like.

"First go into the dressing-room and put it on, and let me see how you look, and then I will tell you their history."

The little governess wanted no second bidding, but snatching up the suit of clothes darted away into the dressing-room. In a few minutes she returned rigged out from head to foot in the boy's suit.

Thad surveyed her minutely for a moment, and then said:

"Couldn't fit better if they had been made for you. You will do, after I give your face a few touches and give you a wig."

"Now for the story," said Florence, throwing herself upon the sofa, her little feet going up into the air higher this time than usual.

Thad looked at his watch.

"Yes," he said, "we have plenty of time. It is of no use going up there for a full hour yet, so I will tell you the story."

"Goody!" cried little Miss Seymour.

"It is now some fifteen years," began the detective in a reflective tone. "Yes about fifteen years. A little lady named Moore, at least that was what she called herself; her right name, though, as I afterward found out, was Lillian Latour, came to me and wanted to learn to be a detective.

"I tried to discourage her from taking the step, but it was no use. In that respect she was something like yourself, Florence; she was headstrong. So I finally agreed to teach her how to be a detective, and that suit of clothes was her first and only disguise."

"Didn't she succeed, sir?" inquired Florence, anxiously.

"No, Florence, she did not."

"Why, hadn't she courage?"

"Oh, yes, she had courage enough, but somehow she wasn't adapted to the business."

"And she gave it up?"

"Yes; after a month of failures, she got discouraged and quit—or rather, she suddenly disappeared, and I did not know what had become of her. It was rumored that she had committed suicide, but I could find out nothing about it."

"Twelve years rolled by, which is just three years ago, when I rescued a beautiful child—she was twelve years old—from some people, who for badness were only second to Madame Vleric and her gang. The child's name was Lily, and insisted upon my calling her Lily Friend. When I got the child dressed—she was in rags when I found her, and I took her to my own home—I found that she was not only very beautiful, but that she resembled a lady I had chanced to meet in my detective work."

"Then I discovered that this lady had had a little girl stolen from her, and so I took Lily Friend to her. The lady at once recognized the child as her daughter."

"But I forgot to tell you that Lily Friend also wore that suit, and did some good detective work with it on."

"I told her the story of the little lady who wanted to be a detective, little dreaming at the time that it was the child's own mother we were talking about."

"And was it?"

"Certainly—as it turned out. The Miss Moore, who tried to be a detective, and Lillian Latour, the child's mother, were one and the same."

"What has become of them?"

"They live in the city. I haven't seen them for some time; but Lily Friend must be nearly a woman by this time. Let me see—yes, she is about fifteen now."

"Just my age," said Florence.

"Yes, just about your age. But, come, let me make you up," said Thad, starting for the dressing-room.

"All right, sir," said Florence, following.

A few minutes' work upon the little lady's face removed all traces of the female, and a wig of short, crisp, curly hair gave the appearance of a genuine boy.

Thad then proceeded with his own make-up, and in course of half an hour stepped forth to all appearances a man on the shady side of sixty, with snowy hair and beard.

He was well-dressed, and might have been taken for a business man who had accumulated a fortune and retired to enjoy it.

Florence was astonished at the transformation.

"Gracious!" she exclaimed, with wide eyes. "It's fortunate I saw you go into that dressing-room, sir. Otherwise, nobody could convince me that you are the same person I was talking to half an hour ago."

"That is the art, my girl," said Thad, in a voice as strange to her as the face she was looking at.

Florence could not suppress an hysterical little scream at the sound of the strange voice.

"What's the matter?" demanded Thad.

"Forgive me, sir," said Florence, blushing. "A foolish fear or suspicion shot through my mind as you spoke."

"A suspicion of what?"

"I don't like to tell. It was very foolish, and won't occur again."

"But you need not hesitate about telling me, Florence."

"Well, then, that maybe it wasn't you after all," she faltered, hiding her face.

"Good!" cried Thad. "That is pretty good evidence that my make-up is all right. But let us go."

The detective and his little friend started for the street. On the stairs they met Nevin coming up three steps at a time, and out of breath.

He was about rushing past the detective, as, of course, he did not recognize him, when the latter put his hand on his shoulder, and checking him whispered his name in Nevin's ear.

"Just the man I want to see," said Nevin breathlessly. "Here, come back to your room. Here is an important letter for you."

So saying, he grasped the detective's arm and almost dragged him up-stairs again.

Thad opened the door and they went in.

"What is it?" asked Thad, a little impatiently.

"Here it is," he said, handing him a letter. "As you see, it was written to me and sent in care of Armstrong; but of course it is intended for you. Read it."

Thad took the letter and read as follows:

"DEAR MR. NEVIN:

"I was not aware, when I met you at our house, the other evening, that you were a detective in disguise. Nor did I know the existence of the state of affairs in the house that brought you here. I now know all; but like the little governess that first gave you information, my hands are tied. You probably saw enough of my sister to know that she rules. She, I am satisfied, is at the bottom of it all. I am sure my brother would never have done such a thing if she had not compelled him. I say compelled. When you understand the case better, you will know how completely she has him and everybody else in her power."

"For God's sake, Mr. Nevin, do something, and at once. Poor Ida cannot live another day, if not rescued from these murderers. I will do all in my power to help you."

"Truly and sorrowfully,

"ALICE LANGLY."

CHAPTER XVII.

DEAD.

THIS letter served a double purpose: It settled the question as to whether Alice Langly was guilty of or accessory to the crime or not, and it served to urge the detective to greater haste in reaching and rescuing Ida.

"What do you think of that?" said Nevin.

"I think, in the first place, that I must get up there as soon as possible; and in the second place that there is at least one honest member in that family."

"Who is that?" asked Florence, who not having read the letter, did not know what they were talking about.

"Why, Alice Langly," replied Thad. "This letter is from her, Florence, and it seems to indicate that she knew nothing about the poisoning until just now."

"I can easily believe that," said Florence. "Alice is a good girl, but is completely under the control of Victoria."

"Well, let us be going," said Thad.

They started for the street again.

As they were going down the steps Nevin pinched Thad's arm and whispered:

"Look here, old fellow, how is it you call that boy Florence? It can't be that any civilized boy ever really had a name like that."

"Not a word, my boy," said Thad, laughing.

"That is a protege of mine."

"That's all right," persisted Nevin, with a puzzled countenance. "But, why call him Florence? Call him Jim, Jack or Joe, or else put petticoats on him."

"All right," said Thad; "I'll think about it."

They walked on, conversing upon different topics, until they reached Broadway, where Nevin was to leave them.

When they reached the corner of the street Thad and Florence turned one way while Nevin turned the other, the latter crossed the street to go down-town; but had no more than done so when he came running back out of breath.

"What is it?" asked the detective, imagining that something was the matter.

"I forgot all about it," said Nevin. "Excuse me, won't you? We were so absorbed with other things, you know."

"Well?" said Thad, impatient to get away.

"Privately, please," said Nevin, taking Thad's arm and leading him aside. "Excuse us, young fellow," to Florence. "The fact is, we'll have to call it fifty to-night. I had thought of twenty, twenty-five and even forty, but come to sum everything up it will take fifty cold."

"In other words you want a loan of fifty dollars, is that it?" said Thad.

"That's it, exactly."

"Certainly, you shall have it, old fellow; but I say, what has become of the ten thousand you just got?"

"Great guns!" exclaimed Nevin. "I had forgotten all about that. Deuce take it, anyway; half the pleasure of life is lost to run through that measly ten thousand."

"How's that?"

"Why, in borrowing."

"I shouldn't think there was much pleasure in that," said Thad, laughing.

"Perhaps not to you," said Nevin, "for the reason that you borrow only to repay in course of time. It is entirely different with me. When anybody lends me money they know they will never get it again. And, as it is more blessed to give than to receive, they are happy, ergo, I am happy. But now look at me: The most unhappy of mortals. I meet friend after friend; we talk, drink, smoke and part. But they see I am changed. My most charming characteristic is gone. It is like being fascinated with a girl on account of her eyes, and then to meet her afterward with green goggles. Some of my friends have spoken of it, and the most of them think I'm stuck up on account of my wealth, but it isn't true. True, the wealth is at the bottom of it, because it prevents me from indulging in my pleasurable pastime. Ah me!" sighed poor Nevin, turning away. "There is one hope left at all events."

"What's that, Nev?"

"It won't last always."

"That is true," said Thad, unable to suppress a smile at the fellow's droolly. "But isn't there danger of getting out of practice by that time?"

"Bless, me!" cried Nevin, raising his hands in horror. "There is danger of that, and for that reason I'll keep it just as though I hadn't a sou. That is a happy thought, Thad. Glad you mentioned it. Many, many thanks. Good-by."

"Good-by, Nev."

Thad and Florence then took a back, and were soon on their way to the Langlys.

Florence was rather down-hearted, and Thad did all he could to cheer her up.

"I wish we hadn't been detained so long by your friend," she said.

"It was unfortunate," said Thad. "Still, it may not prove so. It is early yet—scarcely eleven, and there will be less chance for interruption than there would earlier or later. This is the hour, of all others, when the household will be at the height of its revels and enjoyment, and are not so apt to notice us."

"It isn't that that I fear and dread," said Florence. "You know best the time to go; but it seems to me that we have delayed too long some way. I have a premonition—it may be foolish, but I cannot help it—that—that we are too late to do the poor lady any good."

"Oh, I hope not," said Thad, soothingly.

"I also hope not," said Florence, in a choked voice. "But it is a desperate hope; a hope against hope."

This threw the detective into, if not a melancholy, at least a thoughtful mood, and very little more passed between the two before they reached their destination.

They did not alight immediately in front of the house, but a few doors away, the hackman being instructed to wait for them.

When they reached the Langly mansion it was a blaze of lights, and the sound of many voices in conversation and laughter, mingled with the soft, seductive notes of string music could be heard. The street in front was thronged with hacks and carriages.

"This is strange," said Thad. "There must be a ball going on. I can hardly imagine anything quite so heartless in human nature."

"When you know these people—that is, Victoria and her brother—as well as I do," said Florence, "you will be surprised at nothing in their conduct. Those two people do not know what sympathy is."

"But it strikes me," said Thad, "that good taste would forbid any festivities in a house where one of the household lies at the point of death."

"You do not quite understand the situation

here, I see, Mr. Burr," said Florence in a whisper. "The friends of the family, the old people, and even the servants, are ignorant of the true state of affairs. Those outside of the house think that Ida has gone away for her health, while the old father and mother, as well as the servants, believe that she has some sort of contagious disease, and dare not go near the room."

"This is the most remarkable case of depravity I ever knew," said Thad, with a shudder. "But I am afraid this ball is going to play havoc with our arrangements."

"We will at least make an effort, won't we, sir?"

"Certainly, we will make an effort."

At this point two more carriages drove up, and several fresh guests alighted and entered the house.

Thad waited until the last one had got in, and then rung the bell.

As luck had it, the identical footman with whom he had had the altercation was at the door.

In lieu of giving him a card, Thad whispered the simple word "Lesser."

The footman turned pale hesitated a moment, and then said:

"Wait a moment, please," and shut the door.

A moment later he again returned, and was accompanied by the butler.

The latter was also pale and nervous.

"What do you want?" whispered the butler.

"To come in," replied Thad.

"But there is a reception dis evening, and you can't do nuthin', see?"

"You let me in, and I will manage the rest," said Thad.

"But suppose somebody should see you?"

"Tell them that I am the doctor."

"But the family knows the doctor."

"Explain to them that I am a new doctor sent by Doctor Peters."

The butler hesitated.

"Come, hurry up!" cried Thad sternly. "I have no time to fool with you people. The first thing you know you will be in irons, unless you comply with my wishes."

That had the effect of bringing the fellow to his senses.

Opening the door just far enough for Thad and Florence to pass in, he said:

"Glide up-stairs as soft as ye kin. Take de left hand stairway. Ye'll find it quiet dat way."

Thad wanted no further invitation, but glided softly in, closely followed by Florence.

They passed the reception-room door without attracting attention, and were soon on the stairs leading to the left wing of the building, where the sick-room was located.

They were surprised on reaching the floor above, to find the hall in total darkness.

This hall ran at right angles and communicated with the main hall, and as the latter was lighted, as was also the hall communicating with the right wing of the house, which corresponded with the one where Thad and Florence were, they could see from where they stood everything that went on in the other halls. That is, they commanded a full view of the right sub-hall and a portion of the main hall.

Our friends naturally paused at the top of the stairs to survey their surroundings.

While stauding there they were surprised to see Victoria come up the other stairway, dressed in a magnificent ball costume and looking divinely beautiful as the full flood of light fell upon her splendid neck, shoulders and arms.

She was closely followed by a man who kept his features covered with a shawl until he reached the center of the hall when Victoria had halted and turned about.

Then he removed the shawl, and Thad recognized him as Burr.

He and Victoria at once entered into an animated conversation, but the detective could hear nothing of it, not even a sound, owing to the distance.

Whatever the conversation was, though, it was evidently of an earnest character, for both parties became greatly excited.

It soon became apparent that Burt was upbraiding her about something, and she was trying to conciliate him by offering excuses, which appeared only to excite him the more.

Finally he seemed to be worked up to a perfect frenzy.

He grew livid with rage, his eyes flashed like those of a demon and he gesticulated wildly.

At this Victoria suddenly changed her attitude.

From a supplicating mood it could easily be seen that she had assumed one of defiance.

Her face assumed a hard, fiendish expression, such as it had worn when she shot at the detective, and her eyes were something fearful to behold as she turned them upon her antagonist.

Suddenly, and before Thad had time to think that they had reached such a point, Burt struck the woman in the face.

Wicked as she was, Thad could not restrain his indignation at the sight of a man striking a woman, and was on the point of rushing upon the ruffian, when the situation suddenly changed.

Victoria had evidently not been as badly hurt as any one would naturally expect her to

be from such a blow; but she was wrought up to a pitch of fury that was simply sublime.

The next instant a knife flashed in her hand and while Thad and Florence held their breath in horrified expectancy, the infuriated woman plunged the glittering blade into the ruffian's breast.

"Merciful Heaven!" gasped Florence in a hoarse whisper, clutching Thad's arm; "she has killed him!"

At that moment Burt reeled and fell to the floor, while Victoria fled along the hall and disappeared in a room.

Thad had not uttered a word, but at this juncture he was about to dash off in the direction of the tragedy, when a hand grasped his arm firmly and stayed him.

Looking around, he beheld, outlined in the dim light, Alice Langly!

"Don't go," she said, in a gentle, beseeching voice. "Whatever she may be, he has received no more than he deserved. Let those as bad as himself take care of him, and we will look after the poor, friendless girl whom they are murdering."

"You are right," said Thad, after a moment's hesitation. "You, too, witnessed the tragedy, did you, Miss Langly?"

"Yes, sir, Mr.—this is Mr. Burr, I take it," she whispered.

"It is. How did you recognize me?"

"By your actions, and the fact that I was expecting you, sir," she replied.

"Very good. Let us now go to the sick-room at once."

"This way," said Alice, starting along the hall to the left.

At the extreme end of the hall they came to the room.

They could see by the transom that it was dark in the room.

"What can this mean?" whispered Thad.

"I cannot imagine," rejoined Alice, "unless they have turned the light very low that it may not disturb the invalid."

"Perhaps the nurse has fallen asleep," suggested Florence.

"Perhaps," said Thad, trying the door.

It was locked.

"This is still stranger," said he. "And in my opinion, portends no good."

"Wait a moment," said Alice. "I have a key in my room that will fit the lock."

So saying, she darted away along toward the main hall.

As Thad's eyes followed her, they naturally went beyond her to the sub-hall, and he was surprised to see Burt, who had managed to rise, staggering toward the stairs.

A moment later Alice returned with the key. Thad took it and unlocked the door.

"Let me go in first," he said, and opened the door.

All was darkness in the room, and no sound could be heard except some one's heavy breathing.

Thad flashed his light about the room.

Mrs. Coburn lay on the lounge sound asleep.

Ida was in bed and perfectly motionless. He approached the bedside, and as he did so, Alice and Florence followed him.

The detective raised the wasted white hand. It was as cold as ice!

"Dead!" he exclaimed, starting back.

"My God!" cried Alice, and sunk in a swoon.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONFRONTED AT LAST.

THAD turned his attention at once to Alice, and applying such remedies as he always had at hand, soon restored her to consciousness.

In the mean time Florence sunk down upon her knees at the bedside, buried her face in the bedclothing and gave herself up to weeping.

As soon as Alice was restored to consciousness she cast her eyes wonderingly about the room as if unable to tell where she was.

Finally her gaze fell upon the pale, thin face of Ida, for Thad's lantern threw a halo upon it at that moment, and she burst into tears, at the same time uttering a low, piteous moan.

"Oh, this is terrible!" she cried, wringing her hands in anguish. "To think that such a thing could happen in a civilized country! My God! Is there neither law nor justice?"

"Calm yourself, my dear lady," said Thad, in a gentle, soothing voice. "These people will be brought to justice before to-morrow's sunrise. Where is your brother?"

"In the ball-room, I presume," replied Alice.

"You have not been there, then?" said Thad, glancing at her dress which was an ordinary house robe.

"No; how could I, under the circumstances," she replied.

"Then you knew that she was dead?"

"No. I only knew that she could not last long. I have only had an opportunity of visiting her once since the evening you were here, and then by the greatest stealth."

"Were you not allowed to visit the sick lady?"

"No."

"Who forbade it?"

"My— No, I will never again call her sister. She is *not* my sister."

"It was Victoria who forbade your going, was it?" said Thad.

"Yes, sir."

"According to your letter to Mr. Nevin—"

"Excuse me," she interrupted. "When I wrote that letter I thought it was really Mr. Nevin who was here that evening. I only discovered my mistake this evening."

"How did you find out your mistake, Miss Langly?"

"Through Mr. Armstrong. You see, we had some words on account of his bringing you here that night."

"So I understand," said Thad, "and that was what I was going to speak about. As I was about to say, according to your letter, you knew nothing of the affair until yesterday."

"That is true, sir, I did not."

"How was it, then, that you forbade Armstrong the house because he brought me—or, as you imagined, Mr. Nevin, here?"

"It was entirely owing to a misunderstanding on my part, coupled with misrepresentation on the part of others. I was told that Mr. Nevin, (that is, yourself,) instead of being the gentleman he was represented to be, was nothing but a detective, which I associated in my mind with a policeman. You can readily imagine the feelings of a young lady, with my pretensions to social standing, toward a young gentleman who would bring a policeman to the house."

"You had no idea what the detective was there for?"

"Not the slightest. I was simply told that the gentleman whom Mr. Armstrong had introduced as Mr. Nevin, was a detective, and—as they said—no gentleman."

"Who told you this?"

"Victoria and Robert both."

"How did Armstrong come to find out the mistake?"

"Through Mr. Nevin himself. After I had discarded him on account of his conduct, it seems that he never missed an opportunity of censuring Mr. Nevin for insisting upon coming. Finally, it seems, Mr. Nevin was driven to explain that it was not he that came at all, but another man in disguise. As soon as Mr. Armstrong heard this he rushed off up here to tell me."

"When I found that it had been a detective in disguise, and that he had imposed himself upon Mr. Armstrong for the purpose of getting into the house, I naturally suspected that something was wrong. I questioned Mr. Armstrong himself, but all he could tell me was that my sister, Victoria, according to your statement, was a very bad woman—in short, a murderer."

"Did you not know, Miss Langly, that your sister was a wicked woman?" asked the detective.

"I knew that she was cruel and heartless," returned Alice; "but I did not know that she had ever been guilty of any crime, or that she was quite capable of it."

"How did you discover the real state of the case then?"

"Through poor Ida herself. As soon as I heard from Mr. Armstrong what I have just told you, I took the first opportunity of visiting her, which I had to do by stealth, and the poor girl told me about your being here and what you had told her regarding the poisoning; also about your attempt to rescue her, and finally of your being shot by somebody, she did not know whom."

"And then you wrote to Nevin."

"Yes. You see, Mr. Armstrong did not know the detective's name, and neither did Ida; but he said that a letter to Nevin would reach the right party, as he was a friend of Mr. Nevin. It was only this evening that I learned your name, from the butler, who also told me that you would be here this evening, that you would be in disguise, but that I might know you from the fact that you would go straight to this room."

"I did not dare to enter the room myself, as Victoria had instructed the nurse to

prevent by force if necessary, the admission of anybody.

At this point Thad walked over and took a look at the sleeping nurse.

A very little examination was necessary to prove that her slumber was the result of drink more than fatigue.

"Well," said he, "to prevent further trouble on her part, I'll adorn her now."

"With that" he snapped a pair of handcuffs upon her.

"Now, Miss Langly," he said, "it is not necessary for the present to precipitate disgrace upon you and your parents by making this matter public; and if you can in any way get your brother away from the crowd, I will see that he is quietly taken away, together with the nurse, without creating any suspicion among your friends.

"If he desires he can give some excuse for being called away on business. In the meantime I will notify the coroner and have his duties performed quietly also."

"And Victoria?"

"I will not molest her to-night. That is, supposing she has the effrontery to meet the crowd after what she has done. Now, Miss Langly, will you go down, and, upon some pretext or other, induce your brother to come up here?

"I will try, sir," said Alice.

"If he will not come I will be compelled to go into the ball-room and arrest him in presence of the crowd," said Thad.

"That would be very distressing to mamma and papa," said Alice, "and I do hope it can be avoided."

She then went away.

In the mean time Thad lighted the gas in order that Langly might see the full extent of his crime as soon as he entered the room.

"I do not believe he will come," said Florence, who had now risen from the floor.

"I have no idea he will, either," said Thad; "but it was only just to the rest of the family that he should have an opportunity to conceal his disgrace from the public as long as possible. It will be in the newspapers soon enough."

Scarcely had he ceased speaking when the mingled voices of Alice and her brother were heard in the hall.

He appeared to be protesting against something, and she urging.

As they neared the door Thad heard him say:

"No, no, I cannot go in, Alice. The doctor and Victoria have both told me that the disease is contagious, and that I must avoid the room."

"And you believed them?" asked Alice, incredulously.

"Why not? How should I know to the contrary?"

"Well, I tell you now, Robert, that it is not contagious," said Alice, earnestly. "And moreover, if you ever wish to see Ida alive you must come in at once."

Thad understood by this that Alice had not told him that his wife was dead.

"Great Heaven!" he was heard to exclaim, in a broken voice, "is it as bad as that, Alice?"

"It is," returned Alice, "as you will see as soon as you look at her."

"Is the doctor here?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes; that is, one doctor is here."

Langly required no more urging, but opened the door and entered the room at once.

As soon as he was inside he strode quickly to the bedside, glanced nervously at the dead woman, turned deadly pale and grasped her hand.

"My God!" he exclaimed, in a tone of anguish that could not be mistaken, "my God! She is dead! she is dead! Ida, Ida! My darling, will you not speak to me?"

And then he sunk upon his knees, buried his face in his dead wife's bosom, and sobbed as though his heart would break.

This continued for some time, and Thad was a trifle puzzled.

The fellow was either in real earnest or else he was the cleverest actor he ever saw.

After a long time, during which Thad and the two girls did not disturb him in his grief, Langly arose to his feet, somewhat calm, and turning to Thad, said, in rather severe tones:

"How long has she been dead, doctor?"

"I do not know exactly," replied Thad. "She was dead when I arrived."

"Great Heaven! And was no physician with her when she died?" asked Langly, in apparent horror.

"That I cannot answer," rejoined Thad. "As I say, the lady was dead when I came, and there was no doctor or anybody else here, except that drunken nurse, who was slumbering just as you see her now, and the room was in darkness."

"My God!" exclaimed Langly. "What does this all mean?"

As he said this, he rushed over to where the nurse lay.

The next instant he sprung back.

"Why--why, the woman has handcuffs on her wrists!" he cries. "Will somebody explain what this all means? Alice, dear sister, can't you explain it?"

Alice shook her head mournfully, and referred him to Thad.

"Can you explain, doctor?—but no; you have already told me that she was dead when you arrived, and that you knew nothing about it," he said. "Can nobody—"

"Yes," said Thad, in a voice that made him stop and shudder, I can explain. I told you that the lady was dead when I arrived. So she was, as I have two witnesses to attest," he went on, glancing at Alice and Florence. "But I did not say that I do not know anything about the affair. The fact is, I know a good deal more about it than some people care to have me know."

He watched Langly's face closely as he said this, and was surprised to see no change of expression.

"What a heartless villain!" thought Thad.

Langly made no reply to his remarks, and the detective continued:

"I know that this lady has not died from disease or neglect, as it would appear on the surface."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Langly, suddenly, growing livid.

"I mean that there has been foul play!"

"I do not understand you."

"Then, to make it so plain that you cannot fail to understand it, this lady, your wife, has been murdered!"

"My God! Is it possible?" gasped Langly. "No, no, it cannot be. It is impossible. You jest, doctor, or else—"

"No," thundered Thad, "I neither jest nor am I crazy. I am in earnest, and I have my full senses, and I say that the lady was murdered!"

"For Heaven's sake, explain!" groaned Langly.

Again the detective paused and studied the man's face.

There was something enigmatical in it all, something so puzzling that Thad could hardly make anything out of it.

If there could have been a shadow of doubt of the fellow's guilt, he would have been at once inclined to believe in his innocence.

After a little space of reflective silence the detective said:

"Yes, I will explain the matter. Those who affect ignorance for a purpose are as much in need of instruction as the really ignorant."

"What do you mean, sir?" demanded Langly, indignantly.

"I mean, sir, that your pretended ignorance of the facts about your wife's murder is all bosh; that your pretended sorrow is clever acting, and that you are a cold-blooded murderer. This will explain everything that needs explaining, even to my presence, the handcuffs on the nurse there, and the warrant I hold for your arrest."

Langly stood like one struck with paralysis.

He, apparently, could neither speak nor move a muscle.

"If you require any more explanation before I put the irons on you, I will say that a little over three weeks ago, you, Robert Langly, had your wife's life insured for a hundred thousand dollars. In less than a week afterward you made a contract with a murderer in this city, named Madame Vleric, to put your wife out of the way by a subtle process of her own, for which you agreed to pay, and did pay, in part, at least, the sum of five thousand dollars. It is needless to say that they carried out their part of the bargain. The poor, wasted corpse there will testify to that."

"If further proof of your guilt were needed, I have your wife's statement that you had, on several occasions, expressed the wish that she were out of the way, and then when she became a helpless invalid you have persistently refused or neglected to visit her. Now, sir, what have you to say in your own behalf?"

Langly stared at the detective in a bewildered sort of way for some time, as though unable to make out what his harangue had all been about; and then suddenly appearing to realize his situation, assumed a firm and determined expression of countenance, as he said:

"A lie! An infamous, wicked lie from beginning to end, without a shadow of foundation!"

CHAPTER XIX.

FLOWN.

THERE was an intensity of earnestness in Langly's denial that almost staggered the detective.

In spite of the overwhelming evidence against him, Thad's sympathetic heart came very near getting the better of his sense of duty.

He had, therefore, to steel himself against sentiment and bring all his powers of cold determination into play.

It was a terrible ordeal, but he succeeded after a moment's struggle, and without another word of discussion as to the guilt or innocence of Langly, drew forth the warrant and read it.

When this was done Thad said:

"Now, Mr. Langly, if you desire it, we will go down quietly, take a carriage and drive to the station in such a way as to arouse no suspicion among your guests."

Langly was very pale and nervous.

He hesitated for a moment, cast an agonizing look at his dead wife and an appealing one at his sister, and said:

"Yes, it is better that way. We will go."

And with that, made a move in the direction of the door.

When he reached the door, however, he paused, looked back toward the bed, and then striding quickly to the bedside, threw himself upon the lifeless form of his wife, burst into a wild, heartrending wail.

"Oh, Ida, Ida! My poor darling! What fiend has done this?" he wailed. "What fiendish conspirator has murdered you and contrived to weave a chain of evidence about me that makes it appear that I am guilty of your murder! God knows that I would not willingly have harmed a hair of your head, and if you could speak this instant, you would acquit me!"

After a few moments he arose, and looking wildly about with the expression of a maniac, hissed, rather than said:

"I know! I know it all now! It is Victoria! A thousand curses upon her!"

The next instant he grew perfectly calm again and signified his readiness to go with the detective.

"If you think it necessary or advisable," he said, to Thad, in the most matter-of-fact manner possible, "you may put the shackles upon me."

"Never mind," replied Thad, kindly. "I trust in your honor. If you are an innocent man, which I hope you are, you can have no motive in attempting to escape, and if you are guilty, such a move will only prolong your agony."

"True," said Langly, quietly.

And then turning to Alice, he caught her in his arms and embraced her tenderly.

"Good-by, sister," he said, in a broken voice. "You do not believe me guilty, do you?"

Alice, who had remained remarkably cool and self-possessed up to that moment, broke down at this and sobbed bitterly.

"You do not believe me guilty, do you, sister?" he repeated.

She still did not reply, but continued to weep wildly.

After a little while he appeared to realize the meaning of her silence, and releasing her, said in an almost inaudible voice:

"Yes, yes, you too believe me guilty; therefore I have nothing more to hope. Come," he continued, addressing Thad, "I am ready."

And with bent head and solemn step he left the room.

They proceeded down-stairs in such a manner that nobody would have suspected that Langly was a prisoner.

Only once were they interrupted in their progress.

As they passed through the hall one of the prisoner's guests, and a particular friend, met them, and noticing Langly's dejected air, said:

"Hello, Bob, old fellow! What's the matter? You look as though you had lost your best friend."

"It's nothing," returned Langly, making a desperate effort to appear cheerful. "I'm a little worried about a private matter, that is all."

"Well, you mustn't let small matters worry you," said the other heartily, slapping him on the shoulder. "Come, have a dance, old fellow. That will cheer you up."

"You will have to excuse me, Charlie," rejoined Langly with a grim smile. "I have a matter to attend to that won't keep."

"Oh, to blazes with your business affairs!" cried the other. "You fellows never leave affairs alone long enough to enjoy life. Come on and I'll introduce to you a beauty that has just arrived. You'd better make the most of life while the wife is away, old man."

At the mention of his wife being away Langly turned ghastly and trembled so violently that Thad caught his arm lest he should fall.

"The fact is," explained Thad, "that Mr. Langly is not well, although he won't admit it, and I am taking him away where I can treat him as he requires."

"Yes, that's it," murmured Langly in a faint voice. "Thanks, doctor. Let us get out into the cool air as quickly as possible."

And without another word Thad hurried him out the front door.

"That comes of that deuced business," soliloquized Langly's friend, as he watched the two depart. "Affairs, affairs, nothing but affairs! No wonder their nerves are knocked into a cocked hat before they are old enough for the first wrinkle."

Thad had taken the opportunity afforded by the delay to glance into the ball-room, and was more horrified than surprised to see Victoria, to all appearances radiant with happiness, dancing and flirting as though her life had been one unbroken flood of sunshine.

When they reached the street Florence was close behind them, and Thad dispatched her to notify the coroner of the mysterious death of Ida, and then calling the hack which he had ordered to remain a few doors away while they were in the house, he and his prisoner got in and drove to Police Headquarters.

Little conversation passed between them on the way.

Thad made several attempts to get a statement out of Langly, but the latter absolutely refused to talk upon the subject of his crime. He did admit, however, that he had not lived happily with his wife, and also that he had had her life insured for a large amount; but he would neither state the amount or his motive for doing so.

Finally the detective gave up his inquisition, and allowed the prisoner to relapse into the silence he seemed to covet.

At Police Headquarters he detective turned his prisoner over and got a detail of police to go after the woman, Mrs. Coburn.

He then took an officer, dressed in citizen's clothes, with him, procured a hack and drove back to the Langlys'.

It was now long after midnight and the guests of the late "reception" had all gone and the house was gradually becoming quiet and dark.

The same footman, now awfully sleepy, met him at the door, and the recollection of the promised fifty dollars livened him up instantly.

The butler being summoned, Thad divided a hundred dollars between them, as he had promised, and then asked to see Miss Victoria.

Miss Victoria had retired to her room, and if the amount of his bribe had been a thousand instead of fifty dollars, it would not be a sufficient inducement for them to disturb her. Oh, no. Money was a valuable thing to have, but life was more valuable, and they were not just ready to exchange; especially as the money would do them no good when the life was gone.

Thad found argument vain.

They were evidently deathly afraid of the woman, and could not be induced to go near her, unless she called them.

This being the case there was but one thing to be done: He must go to her room himself.

Would they show him her room? Yes, they would do that, provided she should never be told of their action.

Thad promised that she should never know how he found her room, and they tremblingly led the way up-stairs.

When they reached the second floor, and started along the sub-hall leading off to the right, Thad instinctively glanced at the floor.

Here is where the altercation had taken place between Victoria and Burt, and he naturally expected to see a blood-stain on the carpet; but to his surprise there was none.

What could it mean? He referred to the butler.

"Has the carpet in this hall been changed or cleaned to-night?" he asked, eying the butler closely as he spoke.

"No, sir," was the curt reply.

"Are you sure?"

"Dead sure."

"Could it have been done without your knowledge?" demanded Thad.

"No, sir. Why do you ask, sir?" queried the butler, with a puzzled expression.

"Because there was a fight—a stabbing affray here to-night."

Thad detected the butler and footman exchanging looks, and there was a comical twinkle in their eyes but neither spoke.

This puzzled the detective, and made him feel uncomfortable, but he made no further allusion to the affair, and passed on.

A few steps further along the two flunkies stopped, and the butler pointed to the further end of the hall and said:

"There, on de right."

"Very well," said Thad; "you may go."

The two servants lost no time in going.

Then turning to the policeman in plain clothes, who was at his heels, Thad said:

"Now, Dolan, you want to be ready for business. This is an ugly character we have to deal with. She would a little rather shoot or stab than eat a good meal, and she's no dyspeptic either."

"A petticoat, eh?" said the policeman, with a surprised look. "I thought, from the neighborhood and the house that we was afther a bit of a defaulter, or a matther of that."

"No, this is a woman," replied Thad.

"A bloody ould vixen, I'll warrant," said Dolan. "Wan wid a nose loike the p'int av a bayonet."

"You never guessed worse in the whole course of your life, Dolan. This woman is as pretty as a goddess."

"Oh, the divvil floy away wid her! An' what has she been a-doin' at all?"

"Never mind," said Thad, impatiently. "Let us go and get her."

They proceeded along the hall till they reached Victoria's door.

Thad glanced up at the transom and saw that no light was in the room.

"Too bad to disturb a lady after she has retired," said Thad, "but it has got to be done. I might wait till morning; but she might take it into her pretty head to skip in the mean time; so here goes."

With that he knocked vigorously at the door.

There was no response.

After waiting a reasonable length of time, he knocked again.

Still no response,

"A little game of 'possum," whispered Thad. "There can be no doubt that she heard that last knock; nobody could sleep after that. And her silence bodes no good. The tigress is evidently preparing a little surprise for us. Stand from in front of the keyhole, Dolan."

The detective was about to knock again, when a happy thought occurred to him.

Instructing the policeman to remain on guard at the door, he hastened down-stairs.

The footman was sitting on a settle near the door, sound asleep.

Thad had some difficulty in rousing him up, but finally succeeded.

"Is there not another outlet to Miss Victoria's room?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," replied the footman, sleepily. "There's a private hall and stairway at de

rear of de house. De lady's apartments open on to dat."

"How can I reach it?"

"Go to de rear of de main hall up-stairs, and turn to de right."

Thad waited for no more, and a minute later was traversing the rear, or private hall, which was now plunged in gloom; but a flash or two from his lantern showed him the lay of things, and he hurried on.

A moment later he stood in front of the lady's rear room.

The fan-light over the door emitted a gentle glow, showing that there was a subdued light in the room.

Without a moment's hesitation he knocked at the door.

There was no response, and he knocked again: but with the same result.

After waiting for some time, during which he listened for any noise inside, he knocked the third time, more vigorously than before.

There was still no movement inside, but a moment later he was startled by a footstep in the hall behind him.

Turning quickly and flashing his light in the direction, he was surprised and gratified to behold Alice.

Her face was pale and tear-stained, but there was an expression of cold determination that reminded one of the pictures of the old heroines about to make a sacrifice.

She did not utter a word, but extended her white, little hand, in which she held a key, to the detective, and pointed toward the door.

Thad took the key, and was about to thank her, when she placed her finger on her lip as a warning of silence, and turning fled along the hall and disappeared.

Thad's task was simple now. He had but to unlock the door and enter; but he could not fail to realize the danger attending such a move.

A man may be brave to the verge of intrepidity, and yet have qualms about entering, unbidden, a room in which a deadly enemy lurks.

Summoning all his courage, however, Thad put the key into the lock, turned it and quickly threw the door wide open.

A small chamber-lamp stood on a bronze stand, casting its mellow light over the room (which was the bed-chamber), but no human being was there. The bed was unoccupied.

After flashing his light about so as to satisfy himself that nobody was hiding in this room, he pushed his way into the next, which was the dressing-room or *boudoir*. Everything was in confusion in here. The lady's ball dress was thrown carelessly upon a chair, her dancing slippers lay upon the floor, and a large bouquet of flowers, together with other articles which had evidently been hurriedly taken off and dashed down, lay upon a dresser; but the thing he sought—the woman, Victoria, the beautiful murderer, was not there. He hurried into the front, or sitting-room.

It, too, was empty.

CHAPTER XX.

SAD NEWS.

Not satisfied with his first search of the suite of rooms, Thad opened the front door and called in the policeman for the purpose of making a thorough search.

The policeman had a scared looked on his face when he came in.

He evidently expected trouble at the outset; and when, upon glancing about, he saw no one, his expression changed to one of surprise.

"Whar is she?" he asked, in a whisper.

"That is what I want to know," replied Thad; "and what I called you in to assist me in finding out."

"Ah, bedad, an' she be sthuck away in some bit av a cranny, I'll be bound, an' the furrest thing we know the she-divvil'll be on to us loike a house afoire!"

"That is what we have got to expect and look out for," said Thad. "Now, keep a sharp eye in one direction while I look in another."

"Divvil take the woman anyhow," growled Dolan. "They do be makin' more trouble nor the whole race, entirely. Oi w'u'd tackle a mon ony toime—"

"Never mind, Mike," interrupted Thad. "We'll talk about this some other time. Let us look for the woman at present."

With that the search commenced in earnest. Every nook and cranny was searched; closets, chests under the bed, behind furniture, in fact, everywhere that it was possible for a human being to conceal itself, was searched; but in vain.

The woman was not there.

"There is but one thing more to be done," said Thad, a little despondently, "and that is to search the rest of the house. I was in hopes that this could be avoided; but I see now that it cannot, and the search must be made."

"Hadn't ye betther have an extra detail, sur?" suggested Dolan.

"Yes, we will have to have a squad of at least ten. The house is so large and there are so many rooms and hiding-places that a criminal can dodge from one to the other and avoid capture to all eternity. Go to the corner, Dolan, find the patrol and have him send in an order in my name for a detail of ten good men."

"All roight, sor," said Dolan, and started.

Just then Thad was startled by the sound of soft footsteps close behind him, and turning, found Alice there.

She had come by the back door.

"You haven't found her, have you, sir?" she said, in a subdued voice.

"No, Miss Langly," replied Thad, "and for that reason I find it will be necessary to make a search of the house. I have just sent the officer that was with me to send in an order for a special detail of police for that purpose."

"Call him back! quick! Do, please," she cried breathlessly. "I will explain when you return."

Thad, without further question, hurried to the door.

There was no need of his haste, if he had known it, for Dolan, having seen the lady approaching as he closed the door, mistook her for Victoria, and expecting that his services would be needed, had stopped just outside the door.

The moment Thad appeared at the door to call him, Dolan's face turned several shades whiter, and he instantly drew his revolver.

"Never mind that," said Thad, unable to suppress a smile at the fellow's nervousness. "I only wish to tell you that you needn't call the detail at present."

"Have yez got 'er thin?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes, but remain where you are for the present. I will call you when you are required."

Thad then shut the door and returned to Alice.

"What I wished to explain," she began, "was, that Victoria has fled the house."

"How do you know this, Miss Langly?" inquired the detective.

"From this," she replied, handing him a note.

Thad took the note, held it under the glare of his lantern and read:

DEAR ALICE:—

"When you read this I will be far away. In what direction, you nor anybody else whom I know or who knows me shall ever know.

"My life has not been all that I could have wished it. You, of all others, know how little love or sympathy I have for mankind. This is no fault of mine. I am just as God made me; and if he chose to make me without a heart, I cannot make one for myself, and I cannot be a hypocrite.

"I have struggled all my life to be kind and gentle, which would seem to be natural to one with my physical attractions, but it was no use. There is but one way to express my disposition, and that is, I LOVE TO HATE!

"If I had your disposition, Alice, I would be a different woman. Still, there would be no credit in being good with your soul. It is just as natural for you to be good, gentle and affectionate as it is for me to be cold, cruel and vindictive. It has always been a severe struggle for me to even pretend to appreciate the kindness of others. Had I obeyed my natural impulse I would stabbed any one to the heart that off-red me anything, from a kind word or compliment to a handsome present. My soul always repulsed any one who warmed toward me. I loved * * * the only creature I ever loved, because he was cruel and cold, and never missed an opportunity of crushing me.

"Circumstances will tend to show that I, in common with Robert, am guilty of murdering Ida, but when the facts are known, if they ever are, it will be found that neither of us is guilty. I know who the guilty party is; but if I should tell somebody that I hate would be benefited, an' possibly somebody that I don't hate quite so ardently, hurt. Therefore my lips are forever sealed. I will only say that neither Robert or myself is guilty. God knows I had no objection to seeing her die; and had she been beautiful and a little more gentle and kind, I might have taken a fancy some time to stick a knife into her heart, but I wouldn't stoop to poisoning. That is too

slow. Besides it is cowardly and altogether wanting in romance.

"Good-by, Alice. You will never see me again. This should not worry you, when you consider what I am and have been to you. Learn, if not to forget, at least to hate me, as I do you and everybody else.

VICTORIA M. LANGLY."

"An affectionate and sisterly letter," remarked Thad, when he had finished it.

"Where did you find it, Miss Langly?"

"On my writing-desk; and it must have been put there between the time that I brought you the key and when I returned to my room."

"Why?"

"Because it was not there when I left."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive—I know it, because I was writing a letter to some friends of Ida's regarding her death, when I heard some one walking stealthily through the hall, and went out to see who it was. When I got into the hall I could see no one at that end, but when I looked across toward this end I saw you with your assistant, and knew you wanted to get into Victoria's room to arrest her; so I went back and got the key for you (I have duplicate keys to all the doors in the house). When I came out of my room again you were going down-stairs, so I waited till you came up again.

"When I returned to my room after giving you the key I found Victoria's letter lying on top of the letter I had been writing."

"Then it must have been she whom you heard walking through the hall," said Thad. "Undoubtedly."

"And she was probably in this room when I first knocked at the door."

"Certainly she was, and made her escape through the back-door, while you were knocking at the front," said Alice.

"No doubt of it," said Thad, reflectively, "and that accounts for the brief and abrupt ending of the letter. Do you not see that the signature is dashed off with unusual haste?"

"I can, sir; and I can see that the whole letter was written with greater speed than Victoria was in the habit of writing. She usually writes slowly and carefully."

"Where could she have concealed herself while you were coming out of your room?"

"In a bath-room on the opposite side of the hall from my room."

"What makes you think that she concealed herself there?"

"I know it, because I found the envelope, which was directed to me, and in which she evidently intended to put the letter, on the floor of the bath-room. She doubtless dropped it in her haste and excitement."

"Might she not be there, or in some other place of concealment in the house now, Miss Langly?" asked Thad.

"No, sir," she replied. "I thought of that; and after looking in the bath-room, went down and inquired of the hall-boy, and he told me that she had gone out. Wondering where she could be going at this time of night, he looked out after her and saw her enter a hack which was standing in front of the door."

"Her flight was premeditated, then."

"Yes, most likely."

"Where will she be likely to go?"

"It is my opinion that she will conceal herself in the city somewhere for a few days, or perhaps weeks, until this matter blows over a little, and then go abroad."

"Has she friends in Europe?"

"Yes, sir, in Paris."

"Do you know what relationship existed between your sister and this fellow Manion, Miss Langly?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"The fellow we saw her have the altercation with in the hall to-night."

"I never knew of any. In fact, I never saw her speak to the fellow before. I have seen him here a few times, when he came with Madame Vleric or Annie Montroi, or when he came to bring them something."

"But there must have been something between them, from what we saw to-night."

"So I should judge."

"Was your sister—"

"Pardon me, Mr. Burr," interrupted Alice; "but won't you please call her by her Christian name instead of my sister? I shall never refer to her as my sister again, and I would deem it a favor if others will do the same."

"Certainly," said Thad, kindly. "Well, Miss Langly, was Victoria in the habit of absenting herself from home for long or short periods, when you did not know where she was?"

"That I could not tell, sir. She frequently shut herself up in her room for days at a time, only admitting her maid, who brought her meals to her; and she might have been out of the house, or out of the country, for all anybody knew. There has never been any confidence between Victoria and the rest of the family, except Robert."

"Whom does she refer to by the four stars in her letter?"

"A gentleman to whom she was engaged some years ago, but whom she was compelled to discard on account of the unfavorable reports we had of him."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know, sir."

"Well, Miss Langly, I will not detain you any longer," said Thad, politely, "and I will trust in your honor to the extent of refraining from searching the house. If you hear anything, however, I will deem it a great kindness if you will communicate with me at this place," he continued, handing her a card. "I forgot to ask you if the police took the nurse away?"

"They did, sir."

"Any trouble?"

"No, sir. She had become somewhat sober when they arrived, and went along without a word."

"That was fortunate. Has the coroner been here yet?"

"Yes, sir; and will hold inquest to-morrow. It is shameful that there should be no watch over the body to-night, except the servants; but I did not want to create any more stir than possible, lest my father should discover what had happened. I think I shall sit up with the corpse myself, however."

"You acted for the best, Miss Langly," said Thad. "There is no need of making the innocent suffer any more than cannot be avoided. There is just one more question I want to ask you before I go. It has slipped my memory up to this time, and that is, do you know where Victoria's maid is at present?"

"With Victoria, sir."

"You are sure?"

"If I wanted any better evidence than the word of the hall-boy, who saw them depart together, it would be the fact that they were inseparable; one rarely went anywhere without the other, except, of course, when Victoria sent the maid upon an errand."

"Well," said Thad, despondently, "I have made a bad night's work of it all round. Good-night, or rather good-morning, Miss Langly."

"Good-by, sir."

Thad then took his leave, followed by his escort, Dolan.

As soon as the detective reached the street, and could find one, he called a hack and drove directly to his lodgings, leaving Dolan to make his way back to Headquarters by the street cars.

It was almost daybreak when he reached his apartments, and he was surprised at not finding Florence there.

Moreover, he had sore misgivings that he had not given her a key at the time he sent her to notify the coroner.

Where could she have gone?

She could hardly have gone home in that costume, and there was no place else where she could have gone.

Could it be possible that anything had happened that any of the murderous gang had got hold of her?

This was hardly likely as they would not recognize her in her male attire.

The worry incident to this matter drove all thought of sleep out of his head, and he sunk into an easy-chair to think.

Just then a timid knock came on the door.

"That is she," thought Thad, with a thrill of anticipation, as he ran to open the door.

To his surprise and disappointment, instead of Florence, Chalky Nig stood there.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Thad, not very good-humoredly.

"Please, sir," whined the mulatto, "if you won't hurt me, I'll tell you something."

"All right," said Thad, "I won't hurt you."

"Well, sir, they've got Florence."

"Who?"
 "The madame."
 "When did they get her?"
 "Burt caught her on the street and took her to the madame's flat."

CHAPTER XXI.

AN IMPORTANT FIND.

THAD was so shocked by the news of Florence's abduction that he could not speak for a few minutes.

He soon pulled himself together, however, and questioned the boy further.

"Is Florence at the madame's flat now?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied the boy.

"Where is she?"

"I don't know, sir. Burt took her away during the night, while I was asleep."

"What time did he bring her there?"

"About midnight. I was away when he came."

"What time did you get in?"

"After one."

"Where had you been at that hour of the morning?"

"Out with Miss—that is—"

Here the boy hesitated and became confused.

"Out with whom?" demanded Thad.

"With—with Annie," he stammered.

"Don't lie to me, sir!"

"I am telling you the truth," he averred, having recovered his self-possession and habitual coolness.

Thad pulled the boy over to a seat and sat down facing him.

"Look here, my boy," he began; "I want you to tell me the truth. If you do I will pay you well for the information you give me; but if on the contrary, you lie to me, I will find it out, and it will go hard with you."

"I'll tell you the truth, sir. If I don't you can kill me," replied the boy with apparent earnestness.

"Very well, I will try you. In the first place, tell me honestly whether you know where Florence is or not."

"I do not, sir."

"Sure, now?"

"If I did, sir, I should be only too glad to tell you, for I like her and don't want any harm to come to her."

"Is any harm likely to come to her, do you think?" asked Thad.

"Yes, sir, there is."

"How do you know?"

"Because I heard Burt tell the madame that she must make quicker work of this one than she did of the last, so that the detectives wouldn't get onto them before they got through."

"Look here, boy," said Thad sternly, "don't you know that Florence is at the house of Colonel Manton? Tell me the truth, now."

"I don't know, sir."

"Can you find out?"

"Yes, sir; and I will, and let you know."

"When?"

"To-day."

"All right. Now, there is another thing I want to ask you. You know Miss Victoria Langly who you see her, don't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you seen her to-night?"

"No, sir."

There was a different expression in the boy's face when he said this from what there was when he did not know where Florence was, and Thad believed him to be lying; but no amount of coaxing, bribing or threatening would induce him to alter his reply, and the detective gave it up and changed the subject.

"Do you know Miss Victoria's maid?" he asked.

Instead of replying to this, the boy burst out laughing.

"Why do you laugh?" asked Thad, sternly.

"She's so funny," replied the boy.

"How funny?"

"She sometimes looks like one thing, sometimes like another. You might see her once and not know her the next time."

"How is that?"

"She changes so."

"Her face?"

"Everything."

"Do you mean that she makes up to represent different characters?"

"I don't know how she does it, sir."

"Well, you know her, then?"

"Sometimes I do, sometimes I don't."

"Have you seen her since last night, to your knowledge?"

"No, sir."

"Do you know a woman they call Cora?" asked the detective.

"No, sir, except by sight. I don't know anything about her."

"Is Annie Montroi at the madame's flat now?" asked Thad.

"No, sir. She went with Burt, I think."

"Where to?"

Thad thought he might trap the little rascal here, but he was too keen.

"To take Florence away," he answered.

"And you do not know where they took her?"

"No, sir."

"What time did Burt come home last night?"

"I told you, about midnight," replied the boy, rather curtly.

"So you did," said Thad, as though he had accidentally repeated the question. That was the time he brought Florence, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did he appear to be hurt in any way?"

"Not that I saw, sir."

"Did he say nothing about having received a stab or cut?"

"No, sir."

Thad was perplexed.

How was it possible for a man with such a wound as he had seen this fellow receive at the hands of Victoria, to go about his business with an indifferent air?

There was something strange somewhere.

Thad was morally sure that this boy knew a great deal more than he cared to tell, and there were some things that he was determined to make him tell, if possible.

"Tell me, my boy," he began, "isn't Miss Victoria Burt's sweetheart?"

The boy laughed hilariously.

"What makes you ask me that, sir?" he asked, as soon as he could speak for laughing.

"Because I wish to know."

"Why, sir, I don't think she would wipe her feet on him."

The boy was sharp, and he had evidently been well coached.

Thad about despaired of getting anything out of him; but concluded to ask him a few more questions.

"Did you ever see Miss Victoria in the madame's flat?" he asked.

"No, sir."

"Or Mr. Robert Langly, either?"

"No, sir."

"You know, don't you, that Madame Vleric, Annie Montroi and Burt Manion poisoned Mrs. Langly?"

"No, sir."

"Do you mean that they did not, or that you don't know?"

"I don't know."

"Why did you tell me, when I had you up here before, that the madame made a business of poisoning people?"

"I did not, sir."

"You told me that she killed them by putting tiger's hair in their food."

"Yes, sir, I told you that."

"That is the same thing."

"No, sir, it isn't the same thing."

"What is the difference?"

"All the difference in the world, sir," replied the boy, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, that showed what a cunning young villain he was. "If she used poison, the doctors would find it in the body, and send her to prison or hang her; but when she uses tiger's hair, the doctors can't find anything in the stomach, and she always goes off free."

This intelligence was a set-back for Thad. If it was really true that the tiger's hair left no trace in the victim's stomach, the inquest upon the body of Ida Langly, upon the result of which he depended for the commitment of Madame Vleric and her gang, would be a farce. He would not even be able to hold Langly for trial; for if the coroner's jury brought in a verdict of death from natural causes, the prisoner would be acquitted at once.

Thad had one hope left, however, and that

was the chemist Dudorov's certificate of the analysis of the gruel fed to the deceased.

Therefore he would be on hand with the certificate, and exhibit it to the jury.

And if he only had Florence Seymour to testify to the fact of its being the identical gruel used by the nurse, he would have a pretty good case, but unfortunately he did not have her, and that made it the more urgent that she should be rescued.

"See here, boy," he said at last, "if you will find out for me where Florence is before ten o'clock this forenoon, I'll give you fifty dollars."

"I'll find out, sir, if it is possible," said the boy; "but I won't take your fifty dollars or any other amount."

"Why not?"

"Because, as I said before, I like Florence, and don't want anything for helping those I love."

"Very well; but find her before ten o'clock if possible."

"Yes, sir."

"You may go now," said Thad. "Be sure to be here with some kind of information before ten."

"Yes, sir."

And away he ran.

The detective now having a little time at his disposal, proceeded to make his toilet and after that to go out and get his breakfast.

When this was done he felt greatly improved in spirits, and felt like going to work.

It was still not quite eight o'clock, so he had two hours on his hands.

Thinking over the situation he concluded that he could not put in the time better than by calling upon Madame Vleric.

As Burt was away it would be a good time to take the old woman in out of the cold.

He still retained his make-up of an old man, in which he wished to appear before the coroner's jury, and he concluded that that would be as good a disguise as he could have for the purpose of calling upon the madame.

Thad took a down-town Eighth avenue car and was soon at Eighth street, and not long in reaching Madame Vleric's number.

He remembered the instructions in regard to ringing given him by Annie Montroi on her letter of introduction to the madame, and touched the button twice.

To his surprise the door did not open. Perhaps the madame was not up yet. This was very probable, as it was now but a few minutes past eight o'clock, and a lady that kept as late hours as the madame could hardly be expected to be up at that hour.

Still, as his business was urgent he would be compelled to perform the unpleasant duty of disturbing a lady before her usual hour of rising.

So he rung the bell again, or rather twice more.

Still the door did not open, and he was about to ring a third time when a little girl came out with a pail, and seeing the detective standing there, politely left the hall door open.

Thad lost no time in availing himself of the opportunity, and was soon mounting the stairs.

Upon reaching the madame's flat on the fourth floor, he gave the regulation three raps at the door, and awaited results.

After waiting a long time without either having the door opened to him or even hearing a single movement inside, the detective gave three more very loud knocks.

This met with the same result.

Either the madame was a very sound sleeper he thought, or else she had gone out.

If the former, he determined to wake her if such a thing were within the realms of possibility.

With this idea in view he hammered the door till the glass jingled in the transom over it.

Still there was no response, and the detective lost his patience.

There was a window at the rear end of the hall, open, and in the heat of his excitement and worry he mechanically walked back to the window and looked out.

Whether he did this to get a breath of fresh air, or was simply moved by the instinct that everybody has, of never seeing a window open without being seized with an uncontrollable desire to look out, he could not have told himself; but the action proved fortunate for him, for it led to a discovery. Right under

the window was a fire-escape balcony, extending across the rear end of the flat.

No sooner had his eyes fallen upon this balcony, than a happy thought flashed upon the detective's mind.

He would make an attempt to effect an entrance from the fire-escape.

Without further hesitation he climbed out upon the balcony, and a moment later tried one of the windows.

It was locked. There were two more windows, and he tried these. They were also locked; but that did not bother him much.

Taking out a long, thin-bladed clasp-dagger which he always carried, he shoved the blade up between the two sashes and gave it a wrench.

The lock was easily thrown back and he raised the lower sash, and stepped quickly inside.

He found himself in the kitchen, and from a confused mass of soiled dishes in the sink and unwashed cooking utensils about the range it was evident that there had been cooking and eating there recently, but nobody was in sight.

Thad pushed through into the next, which was the dining-room.

Here the table, still set and covered with more dirty dishes and broken victuals, further attested the recent meal.

And, as nobody was to be seen here either, the detective went into the next room.

This was a bedroom, and the beds were unmade, showing that they had been occupied and left in disorder.

Thence he made his way into another bedroom, where he found the same state of affairs, and finally into the sitting-room or parlor.

Even here there was confusion; articles of various kinds were scattered about in great disorder. There were a few articles of clothing among these things and among the latter Thad noticed an undershirt, the bosom of which was saturated with blood!

"Ah!" mused Thad, "there was something in the stabbing affray after all."

Noticing the door of the little room used as an office by the madame standing open, Thad went in.

This was the last room in the flat. He had visited them all, and there could be but one conclusion: everybody was gone.

His attention was first turned to the writing-desk, and there he saw an envelope, sealed, and directed to Burt Manion, in the madame's peculiar hand-writing.

Thad tore it open, and found it to be a note to the ruffian in question, and, after perusing it the detective concluded that his expedition had not been entirely fruitless.

The note was as follows:

"DEAR BURT:—

"After talking the matter over with Annie, I have decided upon the step we spoke of last night.

"After the blunders made last night and the points gained by this ferret, it will be unsafe to remain any longer.

"A steamer, the Teutonic, sails for Havre this afternoon at three, and we will take passage on her. You will be unable to attend to affairs and catch this steamer; but there is another sail in a few days which will touch at this port. From this port we can easily make our way to the Island of Martinique and there we will be safe.

"Keep the girl Florence well hidden until the time for the steamer to sail, and then take her aboard and bring her with you. The L can be done on ship-board and time saved.

"Have a sharp eye out for the ferret—it would not be a bad idea to silence him, if it can be done without danger of discovery—and, above all, destroy this letter so that he cannot get hold of it.

"If possible make a lump sale of the goods in the flat; if not, raise as much as you can on mortgage.

"Yours in L,
"M. VLERIC."

CHAPTER XXII.

A POMPOUS CORONER.

"WELL," mused Thad, "things appear to be coming my way at last. Going to take a trip to Europe, are you madame? Sorry to spoil your trip, but the thing can't very well be helped. We can't spare you here just yet.

"But this letter must reach the party to whom it was originally directed, and for that purpose I have got to add to the iniquity of house-breaking and opening letters, that of forgery."

With that he hunted up some clean envelopes, and, after several attempts, succeeded in directing one in a hand that the madame

herself would have found it difficult to determine was not her own.

He then put the letter into it and sealed it up.

After destroying all evidence of his "crime," the detective prepared to leave the flat.

First, he re-locked the back window where he had entered and then went out the front door.

A few minutes later he took the car for uptown, and was not long in reaching his apartments.

It was now a quarter past nine, and he looked about for Chalky Nig; but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Only three-quarters of an hour before I must be at the Langly place to attend the inquest," mused Thad. "Still, as I can reach there in fifteen minutes from here, I will devote a half an hour to waiting for the little rascal. Without Florence, my case will be lamentably weak; with her I can carry everything before me."

Just here another happy thought occurred to Thad.

"Why not have the Coburn woman brought out and sworn?

"Under the pressure of severe cross-examination she might weaken and turn State's evidence."

But, in order to have her in time he would have to be off at once. So he concluded not to wait for Chalky Nig.

Picking up his hat he started for the street. He had just reached the sidewalk when the boy came running up to him, out of breath.

His face was, if possible, chalkier than ever, and his whole visage was a picture of despair.

Thad did not require a word from the boy to know that his mission had been a failure; but lest there should have been something even worse, he stopped to interrogate the boy.

"Well, did you find where she was?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," was the surprising reply.

"Well?"

"Hadn't we better go to your room, or some place where we won't be heard?" suggested the boy.

"Yes; but you must be brief, as time is precious with me this morning."

"It won't take a minute, sir."

"Very well, come up-stairs."

And the detective hastened up-stairs and into his apartments, closely followed by the little mulatto.

"Well said?" Thad, as soon as they got inside and the door was shut.

"Well, sir," began the boy, "I didn't know but Florence might be at Colonel Manton's, and I went there first, but she wasn't, and I went to a place on Second avenue where some friends of Burt's live, and where he sometimes keeps things. She wasn't there either, but they told me they expected Burt pretty soon."

"I waited a little while, and sure enough Burt came. He asked me what I was doing there, and I lied to him; I told him that the madame had sent me to help take care of Florence.

"He knew I was lying, for he had just seen the madame. So he laughed and said that Florence didn't need any taking care of, as she would be on ship board before night."

"What did he mean?" demanded Thad.

"I don't know, sir, unless they mean to do what I heard them talking about last night."

"What was that?"

"The madame was talking about going to Europe and taking Cora—Vic—I mean Annie, with her."

"No, you mean Victoria, don't you?" demanded Thad sharply.

"No, sir. I don't know how I came to have those two names on my tongue, unless it was that Victoria wanted to murder me yesterday for doing something and Cora wanted to do the same thing to-day when I went to inquire about Florence."

"Look here, boy, are you quite sure that you don't know that Victoria intends sailing with the madame?"

"I am quite sure that if she is, I don't know anything about it, sir."

"What is to become of you when they all go, my boy?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Did they say nothing about taking you with them?"

"No, sir."

"Well, is that all you know about this affair?" said Thad. "If it is, clear out; I must go."

"Yes, sir, that is all."

"Clear out, then!" exclaimed the detective, not very well pleased with the result of the interview with the little villain.

Thad hurried away from his apartments, and as soon as he reached Broadway called a hack and told the driver to drive for dear life.

And the driver obeyed so well that it was still a quarter of ten when he reached the Langly mansion.

A great change had come over the place since he left that morning.

The coroner was already there, and his presence had attracted the old people's attention. The latter had insisted upon knowing what was going on, and had finally been told.

This naturally threw them into a desperate state of grief and consternation, and everything possible was done to make up for the lack of respect that had been shown the dead. So that now the house was in a state of deep mourning.

In addition to this, the old gentleman, who was afflicted with apoplexy, had been stricken down by the shock upon hearing of his daughter-in-law's death and his favorite son's incarceration, and was now lying at the point of death.

Poor Alice was nearly distracted, but she retained enough presence of mind to meet Thad and ask him whether anything had been heard from Victoria.

"No, I am sorry to say, there has not," replied Thad in a sympathetic voice. "And I have even worse news than that."

"What is that, pray?" inquired Alice.

"Those rascals have got possession of Florence Seymour, and it is their intention, if I do not succeed in rescuing her, of poisoning her as they did poor Ida."

"Oh, horrors!" cried Alice. "Is there no way of stopping this dreadful business?"

"I think there is, Miss Langly, and I am working to that end as hard as I can."

"I do hope you will succeed in bringing them all to justice, even if my whole family is mixed up in it."

Thad then went up-stairs to where the corpse was. It had already been dressed and put into the casket, but owing to the suspicious circumstances connected with her death, she had not been embalmed.

The coroner was just examining the body preparatory to holding the inquest, which was to be held at his office.

Thad handed him a card, upon which was printed: "M. S. Spaulding, M. D.," and requested an interview.

The coroner was a large, bald-headed man, very ignorant, pompous and conceited. His name was Optimus Potts.

"Well, doctor, what can we do for you?" he asked, in a patronizing manner.

"I wish to ask your opinion, Mr. Potts," said Thad, "of the cause of the deceased's death."

Potts looked at the detective with an expression of mingled horror and wounded vanity that a king might if somebody should snatch his crown off, but made no reply.

"A also ask to be allowed to testify in this case, and to offer a certain document in evidence," continued Thad, by way of keeping the ball rolling, as the other had not deigned to reply to his first question.

"Well, sir," said the coroner, after a long time, which he had spent in drawing in large draughts of air, swelling his fat cheeks out till they looked like rubber balloons, and blowing them out again—"well, sir, our opinion of the cause of this person's death will be given to the proper authorities at the proper time. As to your testifying in the case, we have no objection, if you have anything to say—which we take the—ah—liberty to doubt; and as for your document, we hardly see how that will be—ah—admissible. Documents are tiresome affairs, and generally hinder the expedition of inquests; jurors don't like 'em."

"But, sir, this document is brief and extremely pertinent to the case. It is—"

"What is your document?" demanded the coroner, abruptly.

"A certificate of analysis of the food given to the deceased while an invalid."

"What does it say?"

"That the food was tampered with; that it contained matter injurious and fatal to any one using it."

"What is the matter—strychnine, arsenic, rough on rats?"

"No, sir; it is not a poison at all," replied Thad, "but something much more subtle."

"What is it, I asked?" roared the coroner.

"Tiger's hair."

"What?" almost screeched the coroner, growing very red in the face.

"Tiger's hair," repeated Thad.

"Tiger's fiddlesticks!" snorted Potts. "Who ever heard of anybody being killed by eating tiger's hair, or any other kind of hair? Why, sir, I reckon I've et hair enough to stuff a mattress, and look at me!"

"You appear to stand it pretty well," said Thad, unable to suppress a smile; "but perhaps you never tried tiger's hair."

"What's the difference between tiger's hair and any other hair? Damme if I won't engage to eat a whole tiger's skin, tiger and all, if it will have the effect of quieting these quacks that are always harping on this thing being unwholesome and t'other thing being deadly!"

"But, jokng aside, Mr. Potts, it is a well-known fact that the fakirs of India and the Thugs of Africa use tiger's hair, cut up in short bits and administered in food, to destroy those whom they wish to get rid of; and it has been recently introduced in Paris by a notorious murderer, who, I am satisfied, is now in this city."

"Who made this analysis, you?" asked the coroner, contemptuously.

"No, sir; it was made by a chemist named Dudorov—"

"A foreigner, eh?"

"Yes, a Russian, and one of the finest chemists in the country. I have frequently—"

"Some crank, I reckon," interrupted the coroner. "We guess that we don't want any of his documents in ours. We will allow you to testify though," said he, condescendingly.

"Thank you," replied Thad; "and there is another witness I would like to have subpoenaed, if you please."

"Who is it?"

"A Mrs. Coburn. She was the nurse."

"Where is she?"

"In the Tombs."

"What's she doing there?"

"She was arrested on suspicion of complicity of the murder—"

"So you want me to subpoena a murderer as witness, do you?" snorted Potts. "Oh, no; that would be worse than your foreign chemist's analysis."

"But this woman was arrested on suspicion of being guilty of complicity in this very case. She was employed by a woman by the name of Vleric, a professional murderer, to do the dirty work for her."

After a good deal of parleying, the coroner finally agreed to subpoena Mrs. Coburn.

Thad accompanied him to his office, where, after a long time spent in impaneling a jury, the inquest commenced.

The first witness examined was Alice, who stated her belief in the murder theory.

"We don't want to hear what you *believe*," roared the coroner; "we want to know what you *know*. Do you *know* that deceased was murdered?"

"No, sir; but—"

"That will do. Who is the next witness?"

The next witness was Sarah Coburn, who testified that she was employed by Madame Vleric to nurse her patients.

"What is Madame Vleric's business?" asked the coroner.

"Professional nurse, sor," replied Sarah.

"Do her patients usually get well?"

"No, yer Honor, they mostly doies."

"What is the cause of that?"

"Sure, sor, an' Oi don't know," replied Sarah.

"You don't know?" roared the irate Potts.

"No, sor."

"You can go," he stormed. "You're next," he said, turning to Thad.

Thad took the witness stand.

"Your name, please," growled Pitts.

"Thaddeus Burr!"

"What?" and the coroner nearly rolled off his seat.

"Thaddeus Burr," repeated Thad. "And if you wish to know more about me, I am a detective, I am working upon this case and I have evidence enough to convict everybody for whom I hold warrants, regardless of your jury's verdict."

Things took a different turn after that. Thad's name was a terror to Potts, and he acquiesced in everything he suggested, even to taking the certificate of analysis in evidence, and ordering a *post-mortem* examination of the deceased's body. He also ordered the recommitment of Sarah Coburn and recommended the issuance of warrants for the arrest of Madame Vleric, Annie Montroi and Burt Manion.

He then adjourned the inquest pending the *post-mortem* examination.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SURPRISE.

THAD looked at his watch as the inquest was adjourned, and found that it wanted but a quarter of three.

As the Teutonic was to sail at three, he saw the necessity of hastening away at once.

Even then, he had little hope of reaching the pier before the vessel cleared.

But he hurried out to the street, sprung into a hack and drove with all the speed that he could urge the hackman to.

Nevertheless, when he reached Pier 30, North River, it was five minutes past three and the vessel was considerable distance across the harbor.

Some time was consumed in securing a boat suitable for making the pursuit, for she would have to be fleet as the wind, to overtake this rapid liner.

But after half an hour spent in running up and down the dock the detective accidentally ran upon a friend whom he knew to be an inveterate yachtsman.

His name was John Tatlen, a hearty chap and a first-class sailor.

"Hullo, Thad!" he cried. "What are you doing down here?"

"Looking for you, you rascal," said Thad.

"For me? What for?"

"Because I believe you have the fastest launch on the water," replied Thad, laughing.

"So I have. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Everything. Do you see that steamer scudding away in the distance yonder?"

"That ocean greyhound?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I see her; what of her?"

"Can your launch run her down before she rounds Sandy Hook?"

"If she can't I'll scuttle her before night," replied Tatlen.

"Good! Where is she?"

"Right down here at the pier."

"Steam up?"

"Tain't very low, I guess, as I just came in from a run."

"All right," said Thad. "I want you to run down that greyhound."

"What for?"

"I'll tell you when we get out there."

"Oh, you're going too, are you?"

"Yes, and I'll have a small squad with me, if they ever get here."

Thad, on his way to the house of the Langlys, had sent in an order to Headquarters for a squad of police to meet him at the dock and accompany him aboard the steamer.

Scarcely had he ceased speaking to Tatlen when the squad put in an appearance.

"Now we are ready," said Thad. "Come on."

Tatlen asked no more questions just then, and led the way to the pier where his steam launch lay.

The crew was still on board, and there was a pretty good head of steam.

Thad and his escort went aboard, and five minutes more the little launch steamed out into the harbor.

The Teutonic by this time was rounding the point and entering the narrows.

The steamer had about fifteen minutes' start, and was making about fifteen knots an hour, so that the little launch would have some work to do; but as the launch could

easily make twenty knots, it was only a question of time.

The engineer threw the throttle wide open and let her go, and the little launch fairly seemed to skim over the water.

The rear guards and deck of the vessel were thronged with passengers, and as the launch came in sight, though still a league and a half away, they thought it was some passenger that had been left and cheered her vociferously.

But the steamer did not slacken speed and the launch still spun along at her highest rate of speed.

This lasted for over an hour, and the Teutonic was nearing Sandy Hook when the launch got near enough to hoist her police flag.

The Teutonic instantly reversed her engines and whistled her recognition of the signal.

A great commotion on deck ensued.

Everybody wondered who it was to be, for they knew it was some of their number, who was wanted.

Several minutes more elapsed before the little craft ran alongside of the big steamer; but when it finally did, the rope ladders were lowered to the boat.

Thad and his men were not long in climbing on deck.

"Whom do you want, Burr?" asked the captain, as soon as Thad stood on deck, the detective having quietly given him his name for the captain knew him well.

"These are the parties," said Thad, handing him the warrants.

"I don't remember any of these names," returned the captain; "but to be sure we will examine the register."

With that they went back to the clerk's office, and the captain looked over the list of passengers.

When he had got to the bottom of the list the captain shook his head.

"I didn't think there was. I am not often mistaken as to my list."

"Let me look over it," said Thad. "There is sometimes such a thing as reading between the lines, you know."

Thad ran his eye down the list of names, and at last came to three that attracted his attention.

They were:

MME. MARIE LA CHAPELLE, Havre.

MLE. LOUISE LA CHAPELLE, "

JOSEPHINE GARBOT, "

"Who are these?" asked Thad, addressing the clerk, and pointing to the names.

The clerk glanced over his shoulder, scrutinized the names, pondered for a moment, and finally answered:

"All I know about them is, that the first one is an old French lady; the second one a rather good-looking young lady, and the last, their maid, a girl of sixteen or seventeen."

"Is the old lady rather noble, aristocratic in appearance?"

"Yes."

"And the young lady, has black eyes and an olive complexion?"

"No; you missed it, then," said the clerk.

"The young one is a blonde."

Thad thought a moment, and then remembered that he had never seen Annie Montroi, except the casual glance he had had of her in the Park on their first meeting; but he now recalled the fact that she was a blonde. He also remembered that Florence had spoken of her as a blonde.

"Come to think of it, I guess you are right," said he. "She is a blonde."

As for the maid spoken of, Thad had no doubt that that was Florence.

"What is the maid like?" he asked. "Very pale, a trifle sallow, with steel-gray eyes and brown hair?"

"Away off again," replied the clerk, "She is pale enough, I grant you. In fact, she looks as though she might have been cut out of a piece of marble; but her hair and eyes are as black as a raven's wing."

The detective was dumfounded.

It certainly could not be Florence.

Who could it be?

Then a thought suddenly occurred to him. Perhaps it was Victoria's maid.

But what was she doing aboard without Victoria? Alice had said that the two were inseparable.

"Well, I may be wrong in my calculations," he said at last; "but if this is not my

crowd I'll stand treat. However, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Kindly show me to their state-room and I shall soon see whether they are the game or not."

"This way," said the clerk. "I will go down with you."

The clerk led off toward the first-cabin, and Thad followed him with his men.

When they were near the state-room the clerk stopped and said:

"The chances are that they are on deck somewhere, after all."

"That may be," rejoined Thad. "Although people of this kind are apt to keep to their room for the first few hours out of a port where they are wanted."

"Well, there will be no harm in looking, anyway," said the clerk. "Shall I go first?"

"Yes. I will wait here with my men. You go on and engage them in conversation about something pertaining to the vessel or their trip, and then I will come upon them."

"All right," said the clerk.

The clerk went on in advance, and a moment later knocked at the door.

After a little wait the door was opened, timidly, Thad imagined from where he stood.

And then he heard a shrill little feminine exclamation, as if the inmates were surprised that it was only the clerk instead of somebody else who had called.

The clerk bowed politely, smiled, apologized for the intrusion, and began a lively conversation about something, the purport of which the detective could not catch.

After a brief period the clerk turned his face toward Thad and winked, but made no break in the conversation.

Thad whispered to his men to follow him and to be ready for lively action, and then moved toward the door.

He came directly behind the clerk in such a way as not to be seen, and when he was at the clerk's back the latter stepped aside and Thad stepped quickly into the room, before the women were aware of his approach.

The men filed quickly into the room with him, almost filling it.

A single glance showed Thad that he had made no mistake.

There, sure enough, was Madame Vleric, Annie Montroi and a slender, black-eyed, black-haired girl of seventeen.

He had never seen her before, and yet there was something strikingly familiar in the expression of the eyes and the shape of the mouth.

But he had no time to waste in tracing up resemblances now. There was work to be done, and done quickly.

Upon his entrance the women had looked astonished, but the expression had instantly changed to terror a second later when the police filed in.

This was only momentary, also; for the next instant the two women had backed into a corner each, with the maid between them, and all three drew a revolver.

It was difficult to tell which appeared the most determined and formidable.

It would have been as easy to choose between three tigresses.

The only difference was that perhaps the young woman would be the most muscular in a rough-and-tumble, and the old woman the surest shot.

Not a word was uttered on either side.

The women evidently knew what was coming and determined to die rather than be taken; while Thad knew the kind of characters he had to deal with and was as determined in his purpose as they were in theirs.

Scarcely a dozen seconds had elapsed, when the detective had made up his mind what to do.

He held the young woman's keen eye with his own equally sharp orb for an instant, and then, quicker than lightning made a spring for her.

So perfect had been his aim that he caught her by both wrists at once.

While this was going on the police crowded upon the old woman and the maid; but they were not so successful.

The old woman's unerring aim had brought two of them to the floor and the maid had laid another one out.

This left but three uninjured men, but they were sturdy, fearless fellows and the struggle was of short duration after that.

They soon succeeded in throwing both

the old woman and the maid and putting handcuffs on them.

In the mean time Thad was having a heroic tussle with the young woman.

Strong as he was, she gave him all he could do to hold her. Indeed in spite of his gigantic grip she once wrenched one of her hands loose and, before he could secure it again, snatched a knife from her bosom.

The moment she got possession of the knife, the woman made a desperate lunge at the detective's breast.

But he was too quick for her, and striking her wrist a terrific blow, sent the knife spinning in the air.

And then before she could regain her lost advantage, he secured her wrist again.

The struggle became fiercer than ever now. The woman fought like a maddened tigress, and her eyes blazed like balls of fire.

Once she got hold of Thad's shoulder with her teeth and nearly tore a piece out.

Finally he succeeded in tripping her and throwing her to the floor.

As she went down her hair caught upon the hilt of a knife in his belt, and to his surprise, the whole head of hair came off. It was a wig, and the hair underneath was black.

Her face also rubbed so hard against his leg as to remove one of her eyebrows.

As Thad turned her over to place the handcuffs on her, he was surprised to see in the place where the eyebrow had been removed a scar the exact shape of the letter L.

Nor was this all the surprise in store for him.

The woman herself was VICTORIA LANGLY!

CHAPTER XXIV.

NEW DEVELOPMENTS.

ALTHOUGH Thad had had a vague theory for a long time, sometimes stronger and at others weaker, that Victoria Langly and Annie Montroi were one and the same, still, the discovery of the real fact caused him no less surprise.

It was a full minute before he recovered from his bewilderment.

The woman, who had by this time given up the struggle and become calm, noticed the expression of surprise on his face, and, strange as it may appear in one in her position, she smiled.

This increased his astonishment, although he went on with his work of handcuffing her, and she burst into a wild, yet not unmusical, laugh.

"You're surprised, aren't you?" she said.

"A little," admitted Thad, "although I shouldn't be surprised at anything that you do."

"You didn't know that the dashing beauty you met in the Fifth avenue mansion that evening was only a poisoner's daughter who knew nothing of her father, did you, Mr. Nevin?"

The mention of Nevin's name caused Thad to laugh also.

"No, not at that time; although I have had a theory since that you and Annie Montroi, or rather you and Victoria Langly—which shall I say?—were the same."

Here she broke into another wild laugh.

"But you didn't know it?" she said.

"No, I did not know it, positively," replied Thad.

"How does your warrant read, eh?" she cried with a fresh peal of laughter.

"Oh, as to that," replied Thad, also laughing. "I have two, one for each of you. But, come, we must get ashore. Shall I assist you to rise?"

"Thanks," she returned, taking his hand and raising herself up.

"Your hair, Miss Langly," said Thad, picking up the blonde wig.

"Never mind. I will go *au naturel* this time," she said.

"But the eyebrows," he insisted, picking up that part of her lost features.

"Yes, I will adjust my eyebrows," she said, taking it and sticking it on. "It covers up my beauty-spot, my beautiful L."

"It was rather unfortunate that you ran against that scalpel, wasn't it, Miss Langly?" asked Thad, with a twinkle in his eye.

She gave him a queer look.

It was now her time to be surprised.

He laughed in the same vein as she had done at him.

It hurt, and she colored a trifle; although she strove to hide it.

And to his surprise, she did not ask him how he knew of the circumstance.

"Yes, a trifle unfortunate," she said dryly, after a pause, "for me. Rather fortunate for you, though. You wouldn't have known me so readily."

"Perhaps not. But let us go."

"At your service," she cried gayly as if they were about taking up their march for a banquet or ball-room. "You'll have to take my arm, Mr. Nevin; as my bracelets won't permit me to take yours."

Thus she chatted; joked, passed remarks upon the people on deck and the men that assisted in lowering them into the boat. Yet, strange to say, not a coarse or unbecoming word was ever known to pass her lips.

There was a great commotion among the passengers, many of whom were in sympathy with the prisoners.

Not that they knew the first thing about them; if they had, it would probably have been entirely different.

But the sight of three women, one noble and refined and gray-haired, and one remarkably beautiful, in irons and guarded by four armed men, was a shock to the manhood of a good many, and it only wanted a leader to create an ugly riot.

Thad saw the threatening state of affairs, and hastened his prisoners aboard the launch as quickly as possible.

There was a little reversion of sentiment a moment later when the three wounded policemen were borne on litters through the crowd and lowered into the launch, and it was whispered that the women had shot them.

They were far out into the ocean when the word was given to cut adrift from the steamer, and the little steam launch turned her nose toward New York Harbor again.

Madame Vleric was sullen and silent, and the little maid was equally so; but Victoria, whether it was assumed or not, fairly bubbled with spirits and merriment.

"I envy your spirits, Miss Langly," said Thad. "There are not many ladies who could laugh in your position, I assure you."

"Because most women, as well as most men, are fools. What is the use of sadness? The philosopher laughs at pain. Pinch a child and it will cry, because its mind is too weak to counteract the mere animal agony. I hate the world and laugh at it, and people imagine I'm happy."

"But are you?"

"I never stop to consider whether I am or not. I presume if I should stop to ponder over the past and speculate upon the future, I might be very miserable. But I don't believe in self-torture. Do you know, Mr. Nevin, that I never wept in my life?"

"I don't doubt it," replied Thad. "But tell me, how is it, if you are Madame Vleric's daughter, that you are known to New York society as Miss Langly; and believed by Alice and Robert to be their sister?"

Her only reply was a peal of laughter.

"You don't mind telling me this, do you, Miss Langly?" he urged.

"Yes, I do mind telling you," she said, after a moment's silence. "In fact, I won't tell you now. I may some time, not now. By the way, where are you going to put me?"

"That is not for me to decide," replied Thad. "They will probably put you in the Tombs, though."

"That is not a nice place, is it?"

"Hardly up to your Fifth avenue mansion; still, there are worse places. And as you have money you can have a great many comforts."

"How about a mirror? Will they let me have a mirror?"

"Yes, if you pay for it."

"That is good. But I forgot to ask you. Do my parents (so-called) know anything of the affair?"

"They know that Ida was murdered, and that Robert is suspected of the crime. I do not know whether they know of your being accused or not."

"No, I guess not. They probably think I have got one of my spells on me, and am locked up in my room. Find out for me, won't you, please?"

"Certainly."

"And if they do not know what has become of me, let them understand that I have gone to Europe, or anywhere you like."

"Yes, I see, you do not want to add to their sorrow by letting them know that you are in jail; am I right?"

"No. I don't care anything about that. But if they discover that I am in jail they will be coming to see me, crying over my misfortune, and offering their sympathy and love, and that would make me hate them."

"You are a strange creature, Miss Langly," remarked Thad.

"A hateful one, too, am I not, Mr. Nevin?"

"No, not that, but—"

"Yes, say hateful. I rather like you, because you have been caustic and sarcastic with me at times; but if you dare to offer me a compliment or word of sympathy, I'll hate you as I do the rest."

Thad could not, for the life of him, dislike the woman if he tried.

It is natural for a man to like, if not love, a woman endowed at the same time with beauty, wit and cheerfulness; and he could not bring himself to believe that she was half as bad as she pretended.

But to humor her, and thereby gain his point, which was a confession from her, he pretended to coincide with her views.

"I did not like to admit it," he began. "It is hard to be frank with a beautiful woman; but I really think if Satan ever gets a wife that will be a match for him, he will select you out of a million, and I'll put in a good word for you."

She looked at him with an expression of surprise and gratitude, but it soon changed to incredulity and contempt.

"Very clever, Mr. Nevin," she said. "Positively very clever, but as hypocritical as your flattery would be. Even more so; for your inane passion, if you are like other men, might lead you to really believe me lovely, adorable and all the rest of it; but the man was never created who could say an uncomplimentary word to a beautiful woman, unless she were his wife."

"You are too much for me," said Thad, and he really felt it. "Before you uttered this last sentence, regardless of my left-handed compliment, I really believed you possessed some redeeming qualities, but I now see that I was mistaken."

There was a sincerity in his voice and expression that she could not mistake.

"That is more like it," she said, gayly. "That is the first truthful comment I ever had passed upon me, except by one man."

"What did he say?"

"That I was a fiend, a she-devil and a few other choice pet-names of the kind."

"And that man was?"

"The only one I ever loved; and of course he hated me."

"Who was he?"

"That is my business," with a laugh.

"Burt Manion, I guess."

She grew a little confused at this, but denied it strenuously.

"You are wrong, utterly wrong," she said.

"Then why did you stab him?"

This was a surprise for her, but she soon recovered herself, and bursting out into a wild laugh again, said:

"That was a little prank of mine. It didn't hurt him much, I guess."

"Worse than you imagine."

"What?"

She had grown suddenly deathly pale.

It was the first time that he had ever seen her show any symptom of feeling.

"Yes, I say it hurt worse than you imagine," repeated Thad, seeing that he had at last found her vulnerable place.

"How bad?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"I dread to tell you the worst."

"But you must!" she pleaded.

"Can you stand the shock?"

"Yes, better than the suspense."

"Well then—"

Thad paused and watched the effect.

Her cold features had undergone a complete change.

The hard lines had softened and the whole face was a picture of apprehension and agony.

"What?" she gasped.

"He is dead!"

"My God! And with my own hands! The only man, the only being I ever loved."

Her grief and remorse were something terrible.

They could not have been worse had she been the most sympathetic of women.

Thad left her to her grief, believing for the moment that it would do her good—be the means of softening her.

But as it continued his feelings got the better of him, and he bitterly regretted having told her the cruel falsehood.

At one time he was on the point of condoling with her; but remembered in time her peculiar disposition, and decided upon other tactics.

It was a severe trial for him to utter the words, but he said:

"That's good. I'm glad to see you suffer. I love to see people suffer!"

She looked up as quickly as if somebody had stuck a pin into her.

She examined the detective's face a moment, and then said:

"Do you, really?"

Her eyes were still wet, but the anguish had all departed from her face, and something like affection or admiration took its place.

"Certainly," replied Thad with mock earnestness.

"And you are glad that he is dead, and that it makes me suffer?"

"Yes."

"Then I love you!" she cried passionately.

And if expression goes for anything she was sincere for once in her life.

"And I hate you," he replied.

"Good! good!" she cried. "You have made me very happy!"

If Thad had said this a few minutes before, it would have been untrue; for believing, as he did, that she exaggerated if not wholly misrepresented her vile disposition, he rather admired the woman. But when in return for his cruel words, words that would have killed a natural woman, she avowed her love for him, he instantly hated and loathed her with his whole soul and being. So that when he told her that he hated her he told her the candid truth.

By this time the launch had run up into North River and landed.

Thad and his men took their prisoners ashore.

An ambulance was called for the wounded policemen, and Thad, instead of calling a patrol wagon, procured a couple of hacks to take his prisoners to the station.

This was a peculiarity of his. No matter what the circumstances were, or the character of the woman, he never forgot that she was a woman, and treated her with the respect that he would have done had she been the gentlest creature in the world.

As the carriage approached the station, Victoria said:

"I have one request to make of you, Mr. Burr," (it was the first time she had addressed him by his right name).

"What is it?" he asked.

"You have two warrants, you say?"

"Yes."

"One for Victoria Langly, and one for Annie Montroi?"

"Yes."

"Well, would you mind returning the one for Annie Montroi? It will make no difference to you, so long as you have the right person."

Thad thought a moment, and said:

"Yes, I will do that for you. You do not want your right name published, I suppose—that is the name by which you are known in society."

"That is it," she replied.

"You have some regard, then, for the feelings of your friends?"

"Not at all. That is not the idea," she averred, with a sneer. "But every pretty woman in town would gloat over the fall of a rival. I do not want to give them the satisfaction, that is all."

Again was Thad shocked and repelled by her utter heartlessness, and if it had not been that he had already given his promise, he would have rather enjoyed seeing her name published as a tenant of the Tombs.

When they reached the Police Headquarters Thad turned his prisoners over to the authorities, and was about leaving, when the little maid asked a policeman to call him back.

The detective walked back to where she stood, and bent over to hear what she had to say.

There was an anxious look in her pale face and the great black eyes were full of sorrow and anxiety; and they produced two impressions in Thad at the same time: First, a sense of pity for the poor forlorn creature; and second, a renewed impression that he had seen her somewhere before.

"Well? Did you want to speak to me?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir," replied the girl in a whisper. "I want to ask you if it is really true that Burt is dead."

This was rather a set-back for Thad. The idea that the maid should question the statement, while the mistress believed it. However, as he had no motive for deceiving the girl, he informed her that it was not true.

"Then I suppose poor Florence is still in his hands, sir?" she continued.

"I fear she is," was answered.

"I am so sorry. I wish you could find her and get her away. I don't want any harm to come to her; for I like Florence."

The spell was broken. Now he knew that he had not only seen that face before, but he had heard that voice.

"Look here," he exclaimed, "I have seen you before. What is your other name?"

A sad, weary smile came into the girl's face as she rejoined:

"They sometimes call me Chalky Nig; but, that's when I'm playing boy. You know I told you once that Miss Victoria's maid sometimes looked one way and sometimes another."

CHAPTER XXV.

NEVIN'S LUCK.

It was not far from seven o'clock when Thad got back up-town; so after eating his dinner he returned to his apartments, hoping, if possible, to get a sleep, as he had had none to speak of for forty-eight hours.

But, when he approached the entrance he saw that he was waylaid.

A nearer approach revealed the persons of two men, Horace Nevin and Fred Armstrong.

Nevin grasped the detective's hand and pressed it warmly, and then whispered in his ear:

"Congratulate me, old fellow."

"What's up?" queried Thad. "Going to get married?"

"Not a bit of it. I—"

"Fallen heir to a million?"

"Missed it again. That is, you guessed it that time—negatively. I have just lost every cent I had in the world."

"Really, old man, I'm so sor—"

"No, no, no! Glad! Glad, with a big G, is the word! You see, I am happy now, not a dollar to worry about; no fear of banks failing or of being robbed; and what is best of all, I can borrow of my friends without hypocrisy. A fellow hates to borrow money when he has a pocket full, hence the suffering."

"Come up," said Thad, as soon as he got a chance to speak.

"Certainly," ejaculated Nevin. "Pocket-book up-stairs, I s'pose. By the way, my friend Armstrong, Mr. Burr. You've met before, but didn't know it. That is, Fred didn't."

"Glad to know you, Mr. Armstrong," observed Thad, "and I will take this opportunity of apologizing for the trick I played on you that night."

"Don't mention it," rejoined Armstrong.

"The fact is, that little affair was worth a good deal to me."

"Good! I am glad to hear it. Come up-stairs and tell me all about it."

The three men ascended the stairs and were soon comfortably seated in the detective's parlor, smoking a good cigar.

"In the first place," began Armstrong, "I have just discovered that what you told me about Victoria being thoroughly bad is true. Of course you know that I was pretty well convinced of it when you got through that night. But, as I told you then, I loved her, and cared nothing about her badness; it was only the discovery of it that made me wretched. Even then I continued to love her. I don't understand how it was. I knew she was wicked and that she did not love me or anybody else, and yet I went on

loving her devotedly, madly. By Jove, I think she must have exercised some sort of a hypnotic spell over me."

"In other words," interrupted Nevin, "you sung with Moore:

"I know not, I care not, what crime's in your heart;

I know that I love thee, whatever thou art."

Where are your matches, Thad? These cigars of Fred's are like a man at the theater, they always want to go out."

"Up there on the mantel, Nev," replied Thad. "Well, Mr. Armstrong?"

"As I was saying I knew all the time that she was wicked; but try as I would I could not help loving her, and try as I would I could not love Alice. Finally I learned that she was in the habit of ridiculing me; spoke of me as a milk-puppy, a brainless dude, and finally as a tailor made suit with the man left out. Now, sir, what would be your feelings, Mr. Burr, on hearing that the girl you worshiped spoke of you in that manner?"

"I should be mortified, most likely; I know I should be indignant, and I rather imagine my love would cool off a bit."

"That is just exactly how it was with me. I first felt as if I had been discovered in the act of mending my own trowsers; I then felt as if some one had intentionally trodden upon my corns; and finally I had the sensation of having accidentally walked under a shower-bath in full play."

"And your love for her cooled?"

"Went down to zero, my friend. And that is not the worst, or rather the best of it," continued Armstrong. "The last time I called at the house—which was to-day—I found things topsy-turvy. The old folks had discovered the tragedy and the arrest of Robert, and were making Rome, or rather themselves, howl. Everything and everybody was in mourning, from the majordomo to the cat, and amid all the gloom floated Alice like a ray of sunshine in a dungeon."

"Then what do you suppose happened?"

"I have no idea," returned Thad.

"You borrowed fifty from the old gent," suggested Nevin.

"Nothing of the kind," retorted Armstrong, indignantly. "Did you ever light a fire-cracker, Mr. Burr, when the fuse was very short?"

"Yes."

"And notice how sudden and unexpectedly it explodes?"

"Yes."

"Well, that was me."

"What!" exclaimed Nevin, springing up. "You don't mean to say you exploded?"

"No. I fell in love just as quick as that."

"Bah! Victoria was about right," growled Nevin, sinking back into his chair again and pulling vigorously at his cigar.

"Yes," continued Armstrong, "I fell dead in love with Alice and told her so, and she believed it. Then she took me into the parlor and told me a few family secrets, most of which she had just found out; and which I thought might be interesting if not useful to you, Mr. Burr."

"I shall be glad to hear them," rejoined Thad.

"Well, it seems that somebody has discovered the insurance policies on the life of Robert's dead wife, aggregating a hundred thousand dollars, and they are made payable to—whom do you suppose?"

"Robert Langly?"

"No."

"Victoria?"

"No. Marvin Manton, Ida's own father!"

"You don't say!" exclaimed Thad in surprise.

"Yes, sir. He has been making a business of this sort of thing for a long time."

"Then Robert and Victoria were both innocent of the crime?"

"Robert is, and Victoria is only guilty of having a knowledge of it. She took no part in it."

"Mr. Armstrong," said Thad. "did you ever hear that Victoria was not a Langly at all, but the daughter of a French adventuress and murderer?"

"No. I know she is nothing of the kind. I have known her ever since she was a baby, or we were babies together, rather, and she has always been the same; except that she is larger, prettier and wickeder than she used to be."

"That is strange," observed the detective reflectively. I have, first of all, the word of a chemist, who knew her when a child and told me of a scar by which I would know her, and second, her own word that she is the daughter of Madame Vleric, otherwise the Marchioness La Chapelle."

"And I don't believe either one of them," declared Armstrong.

"Has she always lived here, or has she been abroad some times?"

"Oh, she has been abroad frequently."

"I thought so."

"Yes, she was abroad at the same time I was the first time. I was only six years old and she was only four."

"This was about twenty years ago, wasn't it," said Thad.

"About that."

"I think I can unravel this thing now. Do you remember of seeing her before you went abroad that time?"

"No, I can't remember whether I saw her before that or not. I was very young, you know."

"Yes. Well, I guess you never did. When Mr. and Mrs. Langly went abroad that time she adopted her. She was the daughter of this Madame Vleric, who at that time was exported for life for the same kind of business that she has been carrying on here, and the child being left without protection and being very pretty, the Langlys adopted it."

"Is this true?" asked Armstrong in astonishment.

"Substantially. There may be some errors in detail; but it is for the most part true."

"Well, well; will wonders never cease?" exclaimed the young man.

"Now tell me, Mr. Armstrong, do you know where those policies are?"

"At the house."

"Langly's?"

"Yes."

"Can you get them?"

"I can."

"Will you get them and bring them to me by ten in the morning?"

"Heavens, no! What time do you expect a man to rise? I'll tell you what I will do. I will bring them to you to night."

"That will do. But be as early as you can, for I should like to get a little sleep to-night. I haven't been to bed for two nights."

"I'll have them here by eleven. Will that do?"

"Yes, that will do."

As soon as Armstrong and Nevin took their departure, Thad consulted his watch, and finding that it was not yet nine o'clock, concluded by way of killing the two hours and better on his hands, to pay another visit to the Vleric flat on Clinton Place, with a view to finding Burt Manion, and through him, Florence Seymour.

Without loss of time, therefore, he walked over to Eighth avenue and took the downtown car; and in a few minutes was at the place.

He knew it was no use to ring Madame Vleric's bell now, so he rang another, got inside, and when the people whose bell he had rung came out, he apologized for ringing the wrong bell.

Mounting to the fourth floor, he did not stop to knock at the door, as he knew it would do no good, but walked back to the rear end of the hall, raised the window very quietly and stepped out upon the fire-escape balcony.

A glance showed him that it was all dark in the flat. He could see clear through to the front room, and see the street lights shining against the front windows; but there was neither light or sign of life in the flat itself. Thad did not believe there was anybody in the place, but he decided to go in and investigate, anyway; so he unlocked the window with his knife, as he had done before, raised it and stepped inside.

Hazardous as was the act of going through a strange house in the dark, where enemies might be lurking, the detective experienced no apprehensions.

He went from room to room with a little fear as if it had been his own apartments.

True, he was on his guard continually and kept his ears alert for the slightest sound.

He did not flash his lantern during his tour

of the place, as the lights outside enabled him to distinguish objects fairly well, and the lantern would have placed him at the mercy of any one lurking in the darkness.

At the end of ten minutes the detective had made a complete tour of the flat, and had found no token of a human being.

Not entirely satisfied with the result, he now opened the lens of his lantern and made a second round. But this resulted the same as the first.

When this was ended he thought of leaving the place at once, but upon second thought, he concluded to wait there a few minutes and see if something would not turn up.

Throwing himself into an easy-chair, he gave himself up to thought.

The darkness was dense about him, and it was very quiet. There could be no walking overhead, because he was on the top floor, but he could hear sighs dismally among the chimneys and occasionally send a loose pebble or bit of baked mortar skurrying across the tin roof. He could hear a rat gnawing away in the darkness somewhere, and the muffled drone of voices came up from the mysterious depths of the human hive.

Anon the breeze freshened and grew to a gale, and a little after the rain was pelting on the windows.

All this had a lulling effect upon the detective, worn out with unceasing work, and as the minutes dragged on he dozed. From a doze he plunged into a deep sleep.

He had not slept long, however, when he was suddenly aroused by the grating of a key in a lock.

Quickly opening his eyes he tried in vain to penetrate the darkness, and had almost as much difficulty in recollecting where he was.

And by the time he had done this and pulled himself together, the door opened and somebody came in.

The heavy tread proclaimed it to be a man, and a very large one at that.

Thad sat perfectly quiet and awaited results.

The intruder did not pause in the front room where the detective was, but walked straight into the little room used by the madame as an office.

As soon as he got in there he lighted the gas, and Thad saw him approach the desk and pick up the letter he had directed to him that very morning, and tear it open. This proved that he had not been there during the day.

After perusing the letter, the fellow muttered:

"Thank Heaven! they are out of the way, anyhow; and I soon will be, and the girl, too."

While he was speaking, Thad thought it would be a good time to get in some pretty work; so, approaching on tip-toe, the detective was at the fellow's back by the time he finished his muttered remarks.

Burt Manion—for it was he—turned his face toward Thad, and was astonished as well as terrified to behold two dangerous-looking revolvers looking in his very face.

For an instant he was too much panic-stricken to move, but a second later he recovered himself enough to spring back and attempt to draw a pistol.

"Never mind that," cried Thad. "Throw up your hands, old fellow!"

Burt hesitated.

"Up with them, or I'll perforate you!" shouted the detective. And Burt knew by the ring of his voice and the glitter of his eyes that the Invincible was in dead earnest.

The ruffian reluctantly raised his hands.

"Now, what d'ye want?" he growled.

"I want you to tell me where Florence Seymour is, and that quickly, too!"

"I dunno."

"You lie, you scoundrel!"

And in lieu of any further threat, Thad cocked both revolvers. The cold, metallic click proved stronger logic than words, for the fellow yelled:

"Don't shoot! don't shoot! I'll tell ye!"

And instantly told Thad where he would find the girl.

"All right," said Thad, when he had finished. "I'll just put the nippers on you and leave you here till I come back. If I find her, all well and good; but if I don't, you will be a dead man!"

Thad then put handcuffs on his wrists, and with a piece of rope he found in the room,

bound his ankles. He then took his departure, leaving Burt sitting in a chair and locked in the little office.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A JUST RETRIBUTION.

As it was almost eleven o'clock when Thad left the house in Clinton Place, and his appointment with Armstrong was at that hour, he went direct to his apartments.

Armstrong and Nevin were already there, and said they had been waiting a good while.

"Well, did you get the policies?" were Thad's first words.

"Yes, sir," replied Armstrong. "Here they are," handing him a package of large envelopes, "and here is a letter for you, which Alice says she is sure comes from Victoria. It was delivered at the house by messenger."

"Good!" ejaculated Thad, taking the envelope and tearing it open.

The letter read as follows:

"TOMBS PRISON, 19th Oct., 18—.

"MR. BURR:—
Please call at the prison to-morrow, as early as convenient; I have something of importance to communicate. What I have to tell will throw light upon certain matters which are now enshrouded in mystery.

"I send this in care of Alice, as I know no other address that will reach you in time. She will know it is from me, and you may tell her where I am; but nothing to the ancients. Truly.

VICTORIA LANGLY."

"Is it from her?" asked Armstrong.

"Yes. She wants me to call upon her."

"Where is she?"

"In the Tombs."

"The deuce! How did she get there?"

"Now, look here, old fellow," cried Nevin, impatiently. "Do you imagine she broke in, or deliberately went down there and engaged quarters?"

"Not at all," retorted Armstrong, testily. "I'm not such a consummate idiot as that. I only wanted to know how she came to be arrested, and all that sort of thing."

"Well, sir," interposed Thad, "she and her alleged mother, Madame Vleric, was trying to make their escape to Europe, and I nipped their little scheme in the bud by arresting them and locking them up in the Tombs."

"And I never heard a word about it," exclaimed Armstrong.

"You never heard a word about it!" sneered Nevin. "Are the mayor and the chief of police and all the powers that be, in the habit of consulting you about their private and official affairs?"

"No; but—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen," interrupted Thad. "I have some important work on hand, and will have to leave you."

"What's the matter with letting us go along?" asked Nevin.

"Yes, let us go?" echoed Armstrong.

"I shall be pleased with your company, gentlemen," rejoined the detective. "But if you go, you must expect to work."

"Work? Oh, the deuce!" ejaculated Armstrong.

"What kind of work?" inquired Nevin.

"You will have to fight, maybe," said Thad.

"How's that, Fred?" cried Nevin. "Can you fight?"

"I can—but—yes, I'll be blessed if I don't, too!"

"Good!" exclaimed Thad. "Come on."

The house described by Burt as the abiding place of Florence Seymour seemed to have been selected on account of its extreme remoteness from their other abode on West Eighth street; for it was on East 39th street, only a block and a half from East River.

It was a dirty tenement, swarming with the poorest and roughest character of people.

The detective and his companions had no difficulty in getting into the building, as the door was open, and they made their way, amid dirty children and drunken women, to the top of the house.

A vigorous knock at the door brought an old woman, very wrinkled and bent, with a strong odor of gin about her.

"Is Mr. Manion in?" asked Thad.

"Yas, he's in; but he's abed," replied the old crone.

This was a surprise for Thad; but he managed to conceal it.

"I want to see him, please," he said.

"You'll hev ter wait till he's up then," retorted the woman.

"When will that be?"

"He hez ter git up at one ter go on watch."

"All right," responded the detective, handing her a silver dollar. "You go out and get yourself and us some gin or whatever you like best, and we'll wait in here for you."

The hag looked at the coin gloatingly, but was reluctant about letting them in.

"You don't expect us to wait in the hall, do you, my good woman?" pleaded Thad.

"Wal, ye kin go in thar," she finally agreed; "but you must stay in the front room and not make no noise ter wake my man up; 'cause if ye dew, he'll raise Cain. Te, he, he."

Without further discussion Thad and his companions pushed their way into the room, and the old woman toddled off after her liquor.

"That is strange," Thad observed, when she was gone, "that Manion should have such an old hag as that for a wife, when he could have had Victoria for the asking."

"There is no accounting for tastes," rejoined Nevin.

There was no light in the whole tenement except a smoky kerosene lamp on the table in the front room, which only served to render the gloom more apparent.

"I guess I'll take time by the forelock," said Thad, taking out his lantern, "and investigate matters in the old woman's absence. You fellows take these," he continued, handing them each a revolver, "and be ready for business; while I go back through the other rooms."

He then walked lightly into the next room back, which was a bedroom, and flashed his lantern about the apartment.

On a ragged, dirty bed in one corner snored a rough-looking man, with his clothes on. The man was probably sixty or sixty-five, and his face was an index of a life of crime and dissipation.

"I see how it is," mused Thad. This is her man; and I'll wager a cent that they are Burt's parents. Now, lest this old villain should wake too soon, I think I'll just assist his repose."

So saying, the detective took out a small bottle of chloroform, saturated a handkerchief with it and laid it across the old fellow's nose and mouth.

He then proceeded into the next room.

The moment he flashed his light in a certain direction, he was both gratified and struck with pity at the sight that met his gaze.

There, upon a bed equally as filthy and ragged as the one in the other room, was Florence, not lying down, but sitting up staring at him with all her eyes.

Suddenly, and before he had time to speak, she recognized the detective, and springing from the miserable cot, ran to him.

"I thought it was you," she whispered, "when I heard your voice at the door."

"I am glad I have found you, Florence," said Thad warmly. "I had almost despaired of ever rescuing you at one time. But come, we must get out of here. Are those rags all you have to wear?" he inquired, looking at a tattered gown which was her sole garment.

"Yes, sir, that's all," she replied.

"Where is the boy's suit?"

"In there," she answered, pointing toward the old man's room. "But we can't get it, because it is in a chest at the foot of his bed, and if we attempt to open the chest he will wake up."

"I'll risk his waking."

And the next moment Thad strode into the room, threw up the lid of the chest and fished out the suit.

"Now see how soon you can crawl into those clothes!" exclaimed the detective, laughing.

Florence needed no further bidding, but returned to the bedroom she had just quitted, and in five minutes came out fully appareled as a young man.

She glanced apprehensively at the old man as she passed through, and remarked:

"It's a wonder he doesn't wake, he's generally such a light sleeper."

"Been drinking, maybe," suggested Thad.

"Maybe? He always does that; but it

doesn't seem to make him sleep so soundly as he does to-night."

"I have it," exclaimed the detective, as though a bright idea had struck him; "he's been eating onions!"

"Huh!" said Florence, shyly. "He lives on 'em!"

When they passed into the front room, Nevin and Armstrong were surprised at the sight of Thad's companion.

"I thought it was a petticoat you were after, Thad," observed Nevin. "I had no idea—What?" as the light fell upon Florence's face. "Why, cuss my cats, if it isn't the chap I saw with you before, and looks more like a girl than ever. I'll bet a dollar," he whispered aside to Thad, "that that chap will never raise chin whiskers."

"You're safe enough on that, old fellow," returned the detective. "But listen! The old woman's coming! Here, Florence, get behind this chair for a moment."

The girl sprung behind the chair, which was an old-fashioned upholstered affair, and completely concealed her.

On the mantel stood a large clock, and the hands pointed at a quarter past twelve.

Thad opened the face and ran the hands round till they pointed to one o'clock.

The others were puzzled to know why he did it, but they learned a moment later, for by that time the old crone came in with a large flask of gin under her shawl, and several degrees drunker than when she went out.

Instantly she got into the room her eyes fell upon the clock, and she was horrified to see the lateness of the hour.

"Oh, lucky! Oh, Lordy!" she mumbled.

"Who'd a' tho't it was so late? I must wake me man, or there'll be murther! Oh, lucky! Oh, Lordy! He ought to be off afore this!"

And with that she tottered off into the bedroom, and was soon heard pulling and scolding at the old man.

"Now is our time," whispered Thad.

"Come, Florence."

And the four glided softly out of the room, down the dirty stairs, and into the street.

"Glory!" exclaimed Nevin, as soon as they got outside. "It's a relief to breathe the pure air from the sewer and gas-works after being in that stink-factory half an hour."

The night was dark and the rain was coming down in a steady drizzle, so the party walked to the corner of the first street and waited under an awning until they saw a hack. While they were standing there Nevin managed to get alongside of Florence and entered into conversation with her. He had not exchanged a dozen words, however, when he surprised her with the inquiry:

"I say, young fellow, have you any tin?"

"Tin? What's tin?" asked Florence in utmost simplicity.

"Gilt, skads, rhino, coin, shinners, money, see?"

"Oh! No, sir, I have no money," replied Florence.

"Glad you haven't. Because if you had I would borrow it, and I hate to borrow from a boy. Here you are," he went on, slipping a ten-dollar bill into her hand. "That breaks me and gives me a chance to strike one of these fellows."

"But I don't want to take your money, sir," protested the girl, innocently; "especially as it is all you have."

"Sh-o-h! Not a word. That was the reason I gave it to you. That bill has been in my pocket for at least two hours, and it was beginning to give me the heart-burn. You'll do me a great favor by keeping it."

This was said with such an air of sincerity that the girl actually believed that she would do him a mortal injury by returning the money, so she put it into her pocket.

Pretty soon a hack came along, and the party got in. Nevin sat beside Florence, and they seemed to become very much interested in each other, and talked incessantly and confidentially; while Thad and Armstrong kept up an indifferent conversation.

At Broadway, Nevin and Armstrong got out and Thad and Florence drove on to the studio alone.

"Here, Florence," said Thad, handing her the key, "you go up and go to bed. I have a little more work to do yet, and will retain the hack until I get through."

"Very well, sir. But you will be back soon I hope."

"Yes; I am only going down to Clinton Place."

"Oh; to the Vleric Place?"

"Yes."

'Let me go with you, sir," she pleaded.

"Very well, if you are not too tired."

"I'm not the least bit tired, sir."

Thad gave the number to the driver, and they were soon bowling down-town again.

"In the excitement I forgot to ask you about your health, Florence," remarked Thad, as they went along.

"Oh, I'm splendid," she replied.

"They hadn't begun their tiger-hair diet, then?"

"Yes, sir. But you remember the bottle of antidote you took up to Ida?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't know but the time might come when I would need it; so I secured the bottle. I have been using it right along, and their tiger's-hair gruel had no effect upon me."

"Didn't they notice that they were not producing the desired effect upon you?"

"Yes, sir. They said nothing to me; but I heard my uncle and the old woman talking in the next room last night, and in answer to a question from my uncle she said that the brat had a constitution of iron."

"You're a cunning one, Florence. But here is our place," observed Thad, as the hack stopped. "I forgot to tell you," he continued, as they were going up-stairs, "that I left your friend, Burt Manion, in irons up here, pending my search for you. I promised to kill him in case I did not find you. As I did, I will have to disappoint the scoundrel."

As he closed the sentence they arrived at the top of the house, and Thad opened the door.

The place was in darkness, as the detective had turned out the light upon leaving before.

He took out his lantern and flashed it over the front room, and as everything appeared to be as he had left it, he was about to proceed toward the office door to unlock it, when Florence suddenly exclaimed:

"Look there!"

There was a note of such abject terror in the girl's voice, that it gave Thad a genuine shock.

The lantern was turned so that it threw its round halo of light upon the floor, but he could see nothing; he glanced at her for an explanation. She was mutely pointing at the top of the partition which cut the little office off from the large room. The partition did not extend to the ceiling, and when Thad threw the light in that direction, the sight that met him gave him a shudder.

There, hanging half-way over the partition, was Burt Manion—dead!

He had attempted to climb over the wall, and had fallen in such a way that his head was doubled up under him, and the chain connecting his handcuffs, pressing tightly across his throat, had choked him to death, while the rope which bound his feet had caught upon a hook on the inside of the partition, holding him in that position.

"A just retribution, if ever there was one," remarked the detective.

With some difficulty he lifted the dead ruffian down and laid him on the floor, and then he and Florence left the place.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONCLUSION.

THAD and Florence did not remain up long after they returned to his apartments.

He showed her to a neat little bedroom he had for special occasions, and after bidding her good-night, retired to his own room and went to bed.

Fatigued as he was he slept soundly, and was astir early the next morning; but long before he was dressed he heard Florence singing in the kitchen, and was greatly surprised on going out to find that she had breakfast nearly ready. She had resumed her female apparel, which she had left there two days before.

"Why, where did you find anything to cook?" he asked, in astonishment.

"Oh, I've been to market," she replied.

"Well, this is a delightful surprise," he said.

"I'm glad you like it. I was afraid you would not. I haven't cooked for some time, and I am a little out of practice."

But it was a delicious little breakfast, nevertheless, and Thad was not averse to telling her so in the most glowing terms.

There were fresh rolls, a patty of golden butter, some chops, a few slices of crisp bacon and some fresh eggs. She had found coffee in Thad's larder, and had made a pot of the fragrant beverage.

"This breakfast could not be exceeded at Delmonico's," he exclaimed, as he sat down to the table.

"Oh, you flatter!" she cried, blushing.

"Not a bit of it," he declared, earnestly. "I had rather have it, upon my word!"

The little breakfast proceeded cheerfully, and at its close the detective rose from the table and said:

"Now, Florence, I have a good deal to do this morning, and you may either stay here or go up to the Langlys. I think it would be as well for you to go up there, as I have no doubt Alice will be glad to see you."

"Yes, I think that will be best," returned Florence. "I am very anxious to see poor Alice. She must be almost heartbroken, after all she has gone through."

A half an hour later Thad put her into a cab to go up town, while he proceeded to Police Headquarters and procured a warrant for the arrest of Colonel Marvin Manton. He also notified the coroner of the death of Burt Manion.

As it was nearly ten o'clock by this time, he drove without delay to Coroner Potts's office, where the inquest upon the body of Ida Langly was to be held.

He found Potts more arrogant than he had been at their first meeting. A pack of quack physicians, of his own selecting, had held the autopsy upon the body, and had reported that they could discover nothing suspicious about the stomach, and gave it as their opinion that the deceased had come to her death from general debility and wasted vitality.

"Just as I expected," snorted Potts, after puffing out his cheeks till they appeared in imminent danger of exploding. "So this is the sum and substance of all the noise about poisoning and all the fine theories about tiger's hair! Damme, I'd like to stuff some of these quacks' and foreign chemists' mouths with tiger's hair till they couldn't talk!"

With that he told the jury to retire and deliberate.

The jury was only out ten minutes, when they returned with the verdict of death from natural causes."

Thad was not to be so easily defeated, however; and within an hour had procured an order from the court for an expert autopsy, and succeeded in getting Duderov among the analysts.

These experts were not long in discovering sufficient evidence of mal-practice to make Thad's warrants hold; and he lost no time in hunting up Colonel Manton and arresting him.

It was now late in the afternoon, and after getting some refreshments, the detective made his way to the Tombs to fulfill his appointment with Victoria.

He found that lady in one of the best cells, and she had added to the comfort and cheerfulness of the place by ordering several artistic pieces of furniture and a Turkish rug for the feet.

She was sitting in an easy-chair beside a bronze stand upon which was an expensive lamp with a soft-tinted shade. She was dressed in a cherry-colored wrapper and wore a Turkish fez on her head, and she was puffing a cigarette, when the detective entered.

Victoria bowed and smiled and invited Thad to be seated.

"Smoke?" she asked, pushing the box of cigarettes toward him.

"No, thanks," replied Thad. "At least not those things."

"It's fortunate," she remarked nonchalantly. "No good for any one with thinking to do. I smoke them because, aside from the vice of the thing, they impede thought. I don't want to think. Well, what's new?"

"Everything," rejoined Thad. "Burt Manion is in the hands of the coroner, and they find that his death was the result of—"

"My playful thrust!"

"No; his own hands."

"You don't say!" she ejaculated. "Now I do hate him! I always suspected him of being a coward. Well?"

"An expert autopsy of the body of Ida shows that her death resulted from the tiger's hair administered in her food."

"Yes?" coolly puffing away at her cigarette.

"And the evidence, so far, goes to prove that she was murdered by Madame Vleric at the instigation of Marvin Manton, her father, for the purpose of securing the insurance which he held on her life, and he is now in jail. It also goes to show that Robert Langly, her husband, is innocent of any complicity in, or knowledge of, the crimes, and that your guilt extends no further than a knowledge of the affair."

"Which, of course, will be sufficient to send me to State's Prison?"

"That remains to be seen. I have succeeded in rescuing Florence; your parents have discovered that Ida was murdered, and that Robert is in jail; but do not know anything about your trouble. Armstrong and Alice have made up, and there will probably be a marriage in the near future. This is my budget. Now for your story."

"One moment. Has Armstrong learned to love Alice?"

"I believe so."

"And hate me?"

"Yes. At least, so he claims."

"Good! The fellow has a little brain after all. So you want my story, do you?"

"Yes, if you please."

"Well, I had a talk with the madame last night, and this is about the gist of what I learned about myself. Part of it I knew before, and part of what I am going to tell you is my own experience. Madame Vleric, otherwise the Marchionesse La Chapelle, is my own mother. When I was about four years old my mother was suspected of murdering a woman she was nursing in Paris, and a *post-mortem* examination was held. It occurred in our house, and I, child-like, persisted in running into the room where the doctors were at work, there being only a *portiere* in lieu of a door.

"Finally one of the doctors rushed after me with his scalpel, to frighten me. As I ran out I threw the curtain back, which caught his foot and he fell; and as he did so, he fell upon me, knocking me down, the scalpel striking me here over the eye, and making the wound, the scar of which you saw yesterday.

"Well, the result of the autopsy of the dead woman was, that my mother was convicted of murder, and condemned to the galleys for life. She was sent away and I was left with some friends in Paris. Soon after this my mother escaped from the galleys, in company with John Manion, Burt's father, and returned to Paris. She kept herself disguised when she went on the streets, and would have escaped detection, no doubt, if it had not been for me with my tell-tale scar.

This led to her re-arrest, and she was again sent away, this time to the penal island of San Marko. From here she was again rescued by John Manion, who had taken a fancy to her, and she once more returned to Paris. After that she was careful to keep my scar covered up, but she always hated me, and often threatened to kill me.

"One day we were driving in the Bois de Boulogne, when we saw some Americans walking a man and wife and two children, a boy and girl. The girl, who was about my own age and resembled me somewhat, had wandered away from the rest, and my mother enticed her, with sweetmeats, to enter the carriage. The family, taken up with the sights, did not miss the child, and in ten minutes or less my mother had exchanged our clothing, put me out of the carriage and drove away with the other child.

"What became of the other child my mother will not say. I was accepted by the American family, who, you must know, were the Langlys, and whether they ever suspected the change or not I do not know. I was too young then to remember. I have heard my foster-mother say, however, that while they were in Paris I suddenly began to talk French and forget my English, and that she could never account for the scar over my eye.

"Well, to make a long story short, I was brought up as their daughter, and known as

Victoria Langly. I have been kindly treated, given an excellent education, and have had all the luxuries that wealth could buy or love bestow, lavished upon me. And, for my own part, I have tried to be good and kind and gentle, but it was impossible. The devil was born in me. I inherited the spirit of a fiend from my mother, who deliberately sacrificed her home, friends and title, for the sole purpose of going into the world of sin and satisfying her fiendish desires.

"Three years ago, while in Paris, I met my mother. I did not recognize her, of course, but she did me, and not knowing that the spirit of evil was still in me, made herself known to me. I was instantly seized with an insatiable desire to join her; but she would not allow it, and pictured the horrors of her life to me as a means of deterring me. It only added to my passion for crime.

"However, I complied with her request so far as to return to America with my foster-parents, and all might have gone well had it not been for the unfortunate fact of my mother coming to this country, at the solicitation of Colonel Manton and John Manion, who held out golden inducements to her in the poisoning line.

"That was about all. You know the connection I had with this case. As I wrote to Alice, neither I or Robert had anything to do with it, except that I knew of it all along."

"Let me ask you, Miss Langly," interposed Thad, "what relationship existed between yourself and Burt Manion?"

"None, except that he was my half-brother."

"Your mother is his mother, then?"

"Yes."

"How did you come to tell me, yesterday, that he was the only man you ever loved?"

"I did not. I said that he was the only creature I ever loved."

"I see," replied Thad. "Then you loved him as a brother, I presume?"

"No, as a creature; or, more properly, as a fiend. He was the most brutal, heartless, and depraved creature I ever heard of, and that is why I loved him, and not because of any relationship."

Thad was silent a moment after the woman finished her story. He had allowed her to go on to the end without interruption, and could not help but admire the ingenuity with which she interwove truth and falsehood to suit her own fancy or self-interest.

It was evident that, notwithstanding the apparent boldness with which she flaunted her depravity, there was a desire to make out as good a case as possible for herself. In other words, to make it appear that, in spite of her fondness for crime, she was, in reality, innocent of any. Finally he said:

"Your story, Miss Langly, is very interesting, and may, in some instances, be true. Unfortunately, however, there are a few points you have overlooked. Listen: Do you remember meeting a middle-aged gentleman in Madison Square a week ago, and making a bargain with him to poison his wife in consideration of the sum of five thousand dollars? You were then masquerading as Annie Montroi; but perhaps you will remember the incident."

For once in her life Victoria seemed to be abashed. She changed color, and gazed at a figure in the Turkish rug. It was only momentary, however; and a minute later she broke out in a wild peal of laughter, at the conclusion of which she coolly observed:

"You are deep, detective; deep and subtle as a woman. We understand each other."

It was with a sense of genuine relief that Thad took his leave of this heartless creature, whom it would be a caricature to call woman.

But after he got outside, he remembered another matter about which he wished to ask her, and went back.

"Who is this girl," he asked, "variously known as Josephine Garbot and Chalky Nig?"

"Oh, she is a Creole whom my mother brought from Martinique, and I took her for my maid when I was in Paris three years ago. I admired her for her cunning and innate villainy."

"That is all. Good-by."

"Good-by," she cried. "Be good to yourself."

Thad's next move was to go to Headquar-

ters for the purpose of securing the release of Robert Langly; but he found that that gentleman's lawyer had already done that, on a writ of *habeas corpus*.

He therefore drove straight to the Langly mansion to offer his congratulations and tell the news to Alice, who he knew would be anxious to hear from Victoria.

The funeral of Ida had taken place that afternoon (it was now about eight o'clock), and the family were gathered in one of the smaller parlors to talk over the sad and exciting occurrences in the family history for the past few days.

There were present, besides the two old people, Alice and Robert, Florence, Armstrong and Nevin.

Alice introduced Thad to such members of the family as he was not already acquainted with:

The detective shook Robert's hand warmly, and said:

"I am sorry circumstances put you in the light that they did, and compelled me to do that which my heart forbade after I heard your story. But you know what an unpleasant thing duty is sometimes, my friend."

"Yes, yes; you did nothing that you were not compelled to do; and we must thank you for ferreting out the truth, or otherwise some of the innocent ones might have had to suffer."

Thad then had a long conversation with Alice, and told her the whole story as recited by Victoria, at which she was much astonished; but they agreed between them to say nothing to the old folks about it, as it would only add to their sorrow.

The conversation became general after that, except as regarded Nevin and Florence. Thad noticed that they appeared to be deeply absorbed in each other all the evening.

Finally, when the gentlemen arose to go, Nevin called Thad into a corner whither he had led Florence, and said:

"Come to think the matter over and talk it over with this chap of yours, we conclude not to change the first name. You remember I told you to call him John or Jack or Joe, but that was when she had on boy's togs. As it stands now, Florence is regular and good form. But the last name, with your consent, we will alter to read N-e-v-i-n."

"I'm delighted to hear it!" exclaimed Thad. "She will make you a good little wife. I know she can cook, and she is as brave as a little lion. Be a good husband to her, old fellow, and accept my congratulations."

"Thanks. By the way, Thad," continued Nevin, "you haven't fifty about you, have you?"

"I am sorry to say I have not, old fellow, but I can get it for you in the morning."

"Nonsense!" cried Nevin. "Who wants money in the morning? Night is the time the bird flies, and then is when you want cash. Here," he went on, pulling out a roll of bills, "take a hundred to sleep on. Another fool relative of mine died the other day and left me another fortune to worry over. I just received the first installment to-day."

"Never mind worrying over the fortune," laughed Thad. "Florence will help you spend it. Good-by and God bless you!"

THE END.

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